

**A COMPANION TO THE DICTIONARY**

**THE MAKING  
AND  
MEANING  
OF  
WORDS**

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**AUTHOR OF 'WORDS IN THE MAKING'**

**PART AUTHOR OF 'AN ABC OF ENGLISH USAGE'**

A simple introduction, by way of examples and the statement of general principles, to the historical development of the English language. Mr. Vallins is an experienced worker in this field, author of the slight introduction *Words in the Making* and part author of *An ABC of English Usage*, who has a gift for creating a lively interest in his subject and providing a new understanding and enjoyment of the English heritage in its words. Although this does not purport to be more than an introduction, and can be read and understood by those who have little Latin and less Greek, it is a work of scholarship and a sound basis for further study.







# THE MAKING AND MEANING OF WORDS

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

WORDS IN THE MAKING

Adam & Charles Black

AN A.B.C. OF ENGLISH USAGE

(WITH H. A. TREBLE)

Oxford University Press

THE MAKING & MEANING  
OF  
WORDS

A Companion to the Dictionary

by

~~G. H.~~ VALLINS

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## PREFACE

THERE has been of late years a welcome revival of interest in the English language for its own sake. Questions of derivation, idiom, grammar, spelling and punctuation have been eagerly discussed not only in books but also in newspapers and periodicals. With the implementation of the Education Act, and the extension of a more or less formal educational system to cover the adolescent and adult stages, it is reasonable to suppose that this interest will develop and expand. This little book has been prepared for those who, during the next few years, will be entering the new County Colleges and similar schools of further education ; and for those teachers who may be anxious to try a new way of approach with the new 14-15 class in Secondary Modern Schools. It is a simple introduction, by way of examples and the statement of a few general principles, to the historical development of English, in the hope that the story of the past may shed light on and add interest to the present. With comparative philology, except in the simplest sense, and the complicated laws of phonology it has nothing to do. It can be read and understood by those who have little Latin and less Greek. Far from being an end in itself, it is only a beginning ; a book (it is hoped) to whet and not to satisfy the appetite. The most it can do is to encourage in those for whom the formal study of English has been a valley of dry bones a new understanding of and delight in that living language which is our finest and most democratic heritage.

The book has been long enough in the writing and in the printing for the language to have changed perceptibly since I first put pen to paper. References to doodle-bugs, wardens, sirens, Churchill tanks, Eden hats, and Anderson shelters seem a little out of fashion now. But I have retained them all. They point the chief moral of my tale, which is that a living

## PREFACE

language, like English, cannot continue in one stay. The book is already out of date. Indeed, if that were not so, its main argument would not be justified.

My own chief book of reference has been the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*; but I owe much also to other and even shorter Dictionaries. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, though I have sometimes ventured to question its pronouncements, has been my continual guide and stern preceptor. I am indebted to the B.B.C. for enabling me to refer to and quote from their recommendations for pronunciation, *Broadcast English* (1928, 1931). Other books which have helped and inspired me are referred to, as occasion arises, in the text.

My personal thanks are due to my publishers, without whose encouragement and unfailing courtesy I should not have written the book at all; to my wife, who has helped me in more ways than I can number; to Miss R. V. Tickner, who typed much of the manuscript, and (dare I confess it?) now and then corrected my spelling; and to my collaborator of old, Mr. H. A. Treble, who, renewing a happy and valued association, read the book in proof. His corrections have saved me from a few errors the very thought of which sends a shiver down my spine as I write; his suggested additions would have greatly enriched the book, had it been possible to incorporate them; and one or two of his more unguarded marginal comments, if I could only include them, would make it a best-seller.

G.H.V.

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# THE MAKING AND MEANING OF WORDS

## A Companion to the Dictionary

### CHAPTER I

#### THE MAKING OF ENGLISH

##### I

MOST of us have speculated, at some time or other, on the half-dozen books we should take with us if we were unfortunate enough to be marooned on a desert island. A wise Englishman would include in his list a good concise dictionary of his own language; for he would then have not only some specimens of the vast literature he had left behind him, but also a permanent record of the raw material out of which that literature was made. However, we need not suffer the privations of a desert island to learn the value of a dictionary. Between the covers of a comparatively inexpensive book are ranged the words we use to communicate with one another, and which, set in order by the hand of genius, make up the great masterpieces of prose and poetry. But more than this—a dictionary is an alphabetical history of the spoken and written language. Of every word included in it we learn at least five important facts: its form, or to put it more simply, its modern spelling; its meaning, or meanings; its grammatical function or functions; its etymology, that is, the story of its origins and subsequent development; and its pronunciation. For this reason, a dictionary has in itself a real and abiding interest; without it we can never fully understand either our language or our literature.

Meanwhile, however, it is important to remember that in any language the spoken word comes before the written word.

Letters are merely symbols suitably arranged to represent any given sound. But obviously the making of a sound to represent a thing or an idea precedes the representation of it by written symbols on parchment or paper. As little children, long before we can write, we have a half-inarticulate language of our own. Speaking is a natural function of mankind; writing is an art which we acquire. Indeed, the word *language* is derived from the Latin *lingua*, through the French *langue*, meaning 'tongue'; and the root of the word *dictionary* itself is the Latin *dico*, 'I say'.

## II

All this raises an interesting and significant question—on what principles are words admitted to the dictionary? Are they the words of the spoken or the words of the written language? Is there, indeed, any difference between the two? The answer depends on the fact that in the process of being written (whether as literature or for purely utilitarian purposes) the language, as it were, crystallises; and a dictionary represents the verbal stock-in-trade of this crystallised form. This means that until a language crystallises or settles down, in vocabulary and spelling, no standard dictionary can exist. It was not until 1755 that the first true Dictionary of the English Language was made—by Doctor Johnson. Up to a century or so before that time the language had been in a state of rapid change and development. Since then it has changed far less rapidly; it has a certain stability that allows of the formal tabulation of its words, their meaning and uses. Nevertheless, changes are still going on. Every dictionary is in a sense out of date as soon as it is published, since during the period of its preparation it is outrun by the language itself.

## III

But to return to our original questions. We may sum the matter up by saying that a dictionary is the record of those words which have, at some time or other, gained a place in the written language. True, many of them belong primarily to

speech, or only to such writing as directly reports speech. A good dictionary, however, is always generous in its inclusions. It will admit, for example, such childish and facetious words as *tummy* for *stomach* and *noddle* for *head*. 'The vocabulary', says the Preface to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 'is designed to include all words in regular literary and colloquial use, together with a selection of those which belong to the terminology of the arts and sciences and those which are current only in archaic and dialectal use, as well as of words now obsolete but of importance during some period of our literature.' The last clause of this statement is significant. It means that a dictionary contains many words which are no longer in use in ordinary speech, but have been stored up, as it were, in literature; and many others which have had different meanings, and even different syntactical constructions, at various periods in the history of our language. A standard dictionary is, therefore, first and foremost a reference book, not a grammar or a guide to modern usage.

We must, however, be careful in the use of the word 'standard'. Technically, the term is applied to that form of English which prevailed over all other forms, and became the medium of the nation's literature. It is, roughly speaking, the language (originally the dialect) of the East Midlands—the area of which London became the cultural centre. Geoffrey Chaucer, the first great English poet whose vocabulary and grammar are recognisably modern, wrote in the dialect of London; and it was in London that the first books were printed, which were to carry learning and the language to the common people.

## IV

But Standard English, as we know it, is not standard in another sense; that is to say, there is no one authority in England which has power to say of any particular spelling, pronunciation, or knotty point in grammar 'This is right' or 'This is wrong'. In France there is the *Académie française*, which controls the language, modifying its vocabulary and

grammar from time to time as it thinks fit. Some people have thought that we should have a similar Academy to legislate for English. Dean Swift, who had a curious interest in words, wrote an essay on the subject two centuries ago. But nothing has ever come of it. Dictionary-makers and grammarians have, indeed, given their account of the language as it has been, and is still being, 'fixed' by custom. But that is as far as they can go. They often disagree among themselves; and anyone has the right, if he can produce a reasonable and valid argument, to challenge their decisions. Nor is this lack of academic standardisation a bad thing; it has kept English flexible and alive. Words may have the most extraordinary adventures, and even grammar sometimes has to bow before customary usage. All this throws a special responsibility on us who speak and write 'the tongue that Shakespeare spake'—though Wordsworth's phrase is only partly true, since Shakespeare's English is not the English of our own day. The liberty of language which we enjoy is, in a very real sense, part of our democratic heritage; and, like all such liberties, must not be allowed to degenerate into licence.

## v

Many years ago Mr. John Burns spoke of the River Thames as 'liquid history'. It is difficult to coin a similar phrase to describe a dictionary. But there is a kind of parallel; for though a dictionary is not in itself a history book, its pages reveal in an indirect way the 'romantic story of the nation's life and progress over many centuries. They are, in Shakespeare's vivid phrase, the 'chronicles of wasted time'. But this element of history in the dictionary lies concealed until we ask ourselves such questions as 'Where did these words come from? When did they come, and for what reason? What changes, in form and meaning, have they undergone?'

The answer may be expressed quite briefly. English is a composite language; it is made up not only of native words but also of those which it has absorbed from the language of

other people. The native words are those which came down to us from the language of the Angles, Jutes and Saxons, who invaded this island in the fifth and sixth centuries. We usually call it Anglo-Saxon—though some scholars prefer the term Old English. This 'English' language was one of many children of an original parent tongue, sometimes called Aryan or Indo-Germanic. Latin was another child in the same family; so it is not surprising that we should be able to trace some resemblance between certain Latin and native English words. A great German philologist named Grimm formulated a law for the development of consonant sounds in the various languages descended from Aryan. It is far too deep and complicated a subject for treatment in this book. But we may note that according to his law the original sound which became *p* in Latin became *f* in English, Latin *c* became English *b*, Latin *t* became English *d*, and Latin *d* became English *t*. We have a simple illustration in the Latin word *pater* and the English word *fæder*, which later developed as *father*. A more remarkable example is the cognate pair, Latin *cano* 'I sing' and the Anglo-Saxon *hana* which means 'a cock', that is, 'a singing-bird'. In Modern English this word became *hen*, and has undergone an extraordinary change of sex.

Luckily, a considerable body of this Old English literature has come down to us. But after the Norman Conquest (1066) the Anglo-Saxon tongue underwent swift changes, particularly in the simplification of its complicated grammar, and was enriched by a great new influx of words of Latin origin. Most of these were in their French form, as spoken and written by the Norman conquerors; but a few Latin words came directly into the language during the period known as the Middle Ages, and many more afterwards, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At various times, through travel, war, commerce, and exploration, as well as through the word traffic of literature and science, we have absorbed words from almost every country under the sun. And that process is still going on, since English is a living language, growing and developing, like all living things.

## VI

It is interesting to consider these various elements in some detail, remembering, however, that they are not separate entities living in different rooms of the same house, but a united family dwelling in one fellowship together. Here, then, is a very familiar story, written in Anglo-Saxon, or rather in that dialect of it (the West Saxon)<sup>1</sup> which has most commonly survived in manuscripts as literature. It is taken from a translation, probably made by King Alfred himself, of the *Ecclesiastical History* written in Latin by the Venerable Bede somewhere about the year 730. A literal rendering is interlined, in which as far as possible the original Saxon words are retained; and a freer translation into Modern English follows:

*pa he þær in gelimpicre tide his leomu on reste*

When he there in a more suitable time his limbs in rest

*gesette ond onslepte pa stod him sum man æt þurh swefen,*  
set and slept, then stood him some man at through a dream

*'ond him hælette ond grette ond him be his nomanne munde:*  
and him hailed and greeted and him by his name named:

*Cædmon, sing me hwæthwugu.' pa ondswarede he ond cwæð*  
'Caedmon, sing me something.' Then answered he and quoth:

*'Ne con ic noht singan: ond ic for þon of þeossum gebeorscipe ut*  
'Not can I naught sing; and I for that from this banquet out  
*eode ond hider gewat, forþon ic naht singan ne cuðe.'*  
went and hither departed, for that I naught sing not could.'

*Eft he cwæð, se ðe mid him sprecende wæs:*  
Afterwards he quoth, he who with him speaking was:

*Hwæðre þu meast me singan.' pa cwæð he: Hwæt*  
'Nevertheless thou canst to me sing.' Then quoth he: 'What

<sup>1</sup> Actually, some scholars think this translation contains word-forms from other dialects; but in the main it is West Saxon.

*sceal ic singan?* Cwæð he: 'Sing me *frumsceaft*.' þa he ða shall I sing? Quoth he: 'Sing me first creation.' When he then ðas andsware onfeng, þa ongan he sona singan in herenesse this answer received, then began he soon to sing in praise Godes Scyppendes þa fers ond þa word þe he næfre of God the Shaper the verses and the words which he never *gehyrde*.<sup>1</sup> heard.

When, at some more convenient time, he had laid his limbs to rest and had fallen asleep, in a dream there stood a man beside him, hailing him and calling him by his name: 'Caedmon, sing me something.' Caedmon answered and said, 'I cannot sing; for that very reason I departed from the banquet and came here—because I could sing nothing.' Thereupon the man who was speaking to him said, 'Nevertheless, sing me something.' Caedmon replied, 'What shall I sing?' 'Sing to me', replied the stranger, 'the beginning of all created things'. When he received that answer, he straightway began to sing these lines, which he had never heard before, in praise of God the Creator.

Now it is obvious that nobody could read that passage unless he had made some study of Anglo-Saxon—or English in its earliest form. Nevertheless, the literal translation will reveal the fact that many of its words exist in the language to-day, often changed in spelling, it is true, but still recognisable. A few of them have disappeared altogether—*swefn*, *gelimplicre*, *onfeng*, *hwæthwugu* (a delightful word!), *eode*, *gebeorscipe*, *frumsceaft* and *herenesse*. But even in some of these we may trace words or syllables that are familiar to us: *gelimplicre* contains our suffix *-like*, which was afterwards

<sup>1</sup> In the original passage the letters þ and ð stand for the sound represented by our modern *th*, hard as in *thin* and soft as in *the*. The double letter, or ligature, æ stands for the vowel sound in our word *man*.

'weakened' into *-ly* (as in *godlike* and *manly*); the first syllable in *hwæthwugu* is *what*; and *gebeorscipe*, which at first sight is quite unfamiliar, is simply 'beership', where *-ship* is the English suffix of the same root as our modern word *shape*. We have it in *friendship*, *kingship*, and several other words. The same root appears again in *Scyppendes* ('the Shaper', 'the Creator') elsewhere in the passage.

Other words have changed their meaning: *tide*, for example, in this context means 'time', as it does still in the compounds *Christmastide* and *Eastertide*. The verb *can* means strictly 'know', not as in Modern English 'be able'. Its past tense, *cūðe*, also occurs in this passage, a form which survives in our adjective *uncouth*, though here again we have a twist of meaning. It is easy to see, from the idiomatic modern translation, how easily 'know' slips into 'can'. Singularly enough, the verb *meaht* (our *might* [*est*]) in Anglo-Saxon had the force of the modern verb *can* (see page 171)—a force which survives in the corresponding noun, *might*.

Some of the pronouns and connectives (conjunctions and prepositions) have unfamiliar forms and meanings. We shall also see later on, in Chapter V, that what remains in Modern English of pure grammar, as apart from syntax, belongs to Anglo-Saxon, which was a highly inflected language like Latin. This glimpse, however brief, of English as it was in its earliest form will help us to understand the developments which came afterwards; for Anglo-Saxon is the starting point of those changes in vocabulary, spelling, meaning and grammar which are the subject of this book.

## VII

Indeed, immediately after the death of King Alfred (900) the language began to change. It lost, for example, some of its inflexions, partly owing to careless speech, which always tends to slur over or drop off the endings of words, and partly, perhaps, owing to the influence of the Danish language, which was quite closely related to Anglo-Saxon, but had different inflexional particles. A more important change began after the



Norman invasion of 1066. The English were in effect a conquered people; and the conquerors naturally introduced their own language, a French dialect derived from Latin. Nevertheless, the old language was still spoken by the natives, though as the years went on and Saxon and Norman were welded together in one race, the two languages coalesced and became one also. It was a long process, stretching over nearly four centuries (1100-1480). Had the Saxons been a less robust race it is probable that our language would have died out altogether, and Modern English would have a predominantly Latin foundation, with little left of the Anglo-Saxon element, indeed, none at all.

Luckily, however, the strong Saxon (or English) tradition asserted itself; so much so that by the middle of the fourteenth century an act was passed declaring that all lawyers 'fro that tyme sholde plede in her ('their') moder tongue', since French was commonly unknown in the kingdom. Trevelyan quotes a statement by John of Trevisa, a Cornish priest, that, owing to the reforms of two schoolmasters, 'now, the yere of oure Lorde a thowsand three hundred and foure score and fyve, in alle the gramere scoles of Engelond, children leveth Frensche and construoeth and lerneth in Englishe'. The English they construed and learnt was, of course, a fusion of the two languages, Anglo-Saxon and French, in which, however, Anglo-Saxon was the stronger and absorbing element. The language which was evolved by the fifteenth century and is the foundation of Modern English was not a French dialect in which a proportion of native words happened to remain, but King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon changed, enriched, and in part refashioned by contact with the French of the Normans. Three hundred years after the Conquest English, not French, was the 'moder tongue'. 'There is no more romantic episode in the history of man', says Trevelyan, 'than this underground growth and unconscious self-preparation of the despised island *patois*, destined ere long to "burst forth into sudden blaze", to be spoken in every quarter of the globe, and to produce a literature with which only that of ancient Hellas is comparable.

It is symbolic of the fate of the English race itself after Hastings, fallen to rise nobler, trodden under foot only to be trodden into shape.'

## VIII

While, however, Modern English is Saxon in texture, it is not predominantly Saxon in vocabulary. Probably not more than thirty-five per cent. of the words a reasonably educated man uses are of Saxon origin. They are chiefly the names of those common things which would be familiar to a comparatively primitive people—nouns which naturally and easily survived in ordinary speech; verbs expressing elemental and concrete actions, *do*, *speak*, *drink*, *eat*, *sleep* and the like; most of the conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *when*, *as*, *if*, *though*, etc.) that we have in Modern English; many of the prepositions, like *up*, *down*, *in* and *to*; and 'concrete' adjectives, expressing, for example, colour, size and shape, with their corresponding adverbs. On the whole, the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary in Modern English is that which expresses the concrete rather than the abstract, and its words are characterised by a strong simplicity of form.

Many of these Saxon words are of peculiar historical significance, since they reflect the various stages of primitive civilisation. There are some, for example, which we can trace back to our ancestors long before they settled in Northern Europe, and came thence to Britain. From those remote times we get our words for the numbers up to ten, for family names like *mother*, *father*, *sister* (see page 19), *brother*, for certain parts of the body, like *foot*, *knee* and *tooth*, for the parts of a house or building, like *door*, *timber* and *thatch*, and for animals, like *goat*, *ewe*, *cow* and *ox*. Later on come words which betoken the development of agriculture, like *furrow*, *bean* and *corn*. Then, as always, language reflected history; words like, for example, *wheel* and *axle*, which belong to primitive times, are signposts on the road of the progress of mankind.

This surviving element of Anglo-Saxon takes an honoured

place in our English to-day. Its words have a fine, manly ring about them. There have, indeed, been those who have given this advice to young writers: 'When in doubt, and you have a choice, choose the Saxon word rather than the Latin derivative.' But that is a mistaken doctrine, which ignores the essential 'oneness' of the modern language, and the fact that all words, of whatever origin, are available for our use in the right place and at the right time. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, commenting goodhumouredly on the Saxon obsession of some previous University professors, remarks that they 'composed long sentences painfully innocent of any word not derivable from Anglo-Saxon, sentences in which the "impenetrability of matter" became the "un-go-throughsomeness of stuff"'.<sup>1</sup> It is true that some great pieces of literature—notably the Authorised Version of the Bible (1611)—are largely Saxon in vocabulary. We have only to read a typical story in the Old Testament to realise the force and simple strength of a vocabulary that is predominantly Saxon:

And three of the thirty chief went down, and came to David in the harvest time unto the cave of Adullam; and the troop of the Philistines pitched in the valley of Rephaim. And David was then in an hold, and the garrison of the Philistines was then in Beth-lehem.

And David longed, and said, 'Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Beth-lehem, which is by the gate!'

And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Beth-lehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord.

And he said, 'Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?' Therefore he would not drink it. These things did these three mighty men.

<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Reading*, Lecture VI.

In this passage only seven words are of Latin origin—*chief*, *cave*, *troop*, *valley*, *garrison*, *host* and *jeopardy* (an interesting word, whose history is outlined on page 104), all of which have come to us from French. *Pitch* and *poured* are doubtful; they both existed in Middle English, but their etymology is not known.<sup>1</sup> So also John Bunyan, who was himself a simple and unlearned man, used a vocabulary that was mainly Saxon, partly because it was inspired by the Authorised Version itself. We cannot but be stirred by such a passage as this, in which only nine words (*carry*, *battles*, *accompanied*, *river*, *grave*, *victory*, *passed*, *trumpets*, *sounded*) are not Saxon in origin:

My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought his battles who will now be my rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river side, into which as he went he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?' And as he went down deeper, he said, 'Grave, where is thy victory?' So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

We may remember, too, how in our own times Mr. Churchill dramatised the bitter struggle of the recent war in a phrase that is mainly Saxon—'sweat, blood, toil and tears'. It is not difficult to realise the force and power of the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary when it is judiciously used, but it is folly to neglect the other wealth of the language for the mere sake of using it.

## IX

To enumerate or classify the French words which the Normans introduced into the language would, of course, be impossible. Trevelyan says they were mainly words 'relating

<sup>1</sup> But Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch points out, in another connexion, that the translators of the Authorised Version also knew how to use the rolling Latin word: 'So when this *corruptible* shall have put on *incorruption*, and this *mortal* should have put on *immortality*. . .'

to war, politics, justice, religion, cooking and art'. The Normans, bringing with them a more intellectual culture than the native English possessed, tended to substitute their own 'abstract' words of Latin derivation for the picturesque but unwieldy compounds in which Anglo-Saxon delighted—'charity' or 'pity' for *mildheortnes*, 'citizen' for *byrig-wearu* ('burg-dwellers'), 'disciple' for *learning-cniht* ('learning-knight'), 'banquet' or 'feast' for *beorscipe* (see page 8), 'astronomy', through French from Greek, for *steorrcraft* ('star-craft'). The process of the infiltration of French words into the vocabulary of English is plain in medieval literature. We see it clearly in Chaucer (fourteenth century). Here is a passage from his Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, which adequately represents the language as it was in his time. The words of French origin are printed in italics:

Ful semely after hir mete she raughte,  
 And sikerly she was of greet *disport*,  
 And ful *plesaunt*, and *amiable* of *port*,  
 And *peyned* hir to *countrefete chere*  
 Of *court*, and been *estallich* of *manere*,  
 And to be holden *digne* of *reverence*.  
 But, for to speken of hir *conscience*,  
 She was so *charitable* and so *pitous*,  
 She wolde wepe, if that she sawe a mous  
 Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.  
 Of smale houndes had she, that she fedde  
 With *roosted* flesh, or milk and *wastel* bread.  
 But sore weep she if oon of hem were deed,  
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte:  
 And al was *conscience* and *tendre* herte.

We have only to glance at that passage to realise that the language had undergone great changes since the days of King Alfred. Some of the words have an unfamiliar form, and two or three of them—*raughte* ('reached')<sup>1</sup>, *sikerly* ('certainly'),

<sup>1</sup> See page 171.

and *wastel* ('cake') have dropped out of our vocabulary. Chaucer stands at the dividing line between ancient and modern. He uses many Saxon and a few French words (like *digne* and *wastel* which is another form of the Modern French word *gâteau*, 'cake'—see page 50) that we have now lost; but, as we may gather from the number of French derivatives in that short extract, he avails himself to the full of the new verbal riches introduced by the Normans. Since his time the language has developed; there have been, as we shall see, many changes in the form and meaning of words. But the essential texture of Chaucer's English is that of the English we use to-day.

This great influx of French words during the Middle Ages represents an *indirect* Latin influence on the language. It did not cease suddenly when during the fifteenth century the medieval turned into the modern. Geographically we are very near to France; and more than any other European nation she has since contributed to our stock of words, especially during the seventeenth century, when, in the reign of Charles II, the two countries were in close political and literary relationship, and again in recent times, when we have been bound to her by what is called the *Entente Cordiale*.

## X

But there is also a very important *direct* Latin influence on English. One or two Latin words existed in the language of the Anglo-Saxon tribes while they were still on the continent, before they came to this island; probably the most interesting of them are *bishop*, *devil* and *angel*, the very word Pope Gregory used in his punning remark about the English boys and girls in the Roman slave-markets: 'Non Angli sed angeli.' Afterwards, when the invaders did come, they found a Britain which for over four centuries had been a Roman settlement and had naturally acquired a certain Latin vocabulary. Several words from this Latin-British language found their way into Anglo-Saxon: *ceaster*, a town or city, from the Latin *castra* ('camp'); *strete* ('street') from *strata (via)*, a 'paved way';

*pere* ('pear') from *pirum*; *pipor* ('pepper') from *piper*, and a few others. Later on, in the year 597, a new batch of words was introduced by the Christian missionaries under Saint Augustine. These words were naturally connected with religion and church life, like *abbod*, *candel*, *aelmesse* ('alms'), *pope*, *mass*, *preost*, and *cross*, which gradually took the place of the normal Anglo-Saxon word *rood*.

One or two are of special interest. *Mile* is from the Latin *milia*, 'thousand'—the thousand paces of the Roman soldier; *pound*, the weight, is the Latin *pondo*, and *inch* came by way of the Anglo-Saxon *ynce* from Latin *uncia*, 'a twelfth part'. At a much later date the same word gave us, through French, the name of another unit of measurement, *ounce*: so *inch* and *ounce* are, by derivation, one and the same word. *Mint*, from Latin *moneta*, originally the name of the goddess in whose temple money was made, existed in Anglo-Saxon and meant 'money'; its later sense developed during the Middle Ages, when the word *money* itself came into English, through French, from the same Latin root. It is a little surprising that *-monger*, in such compounds as *fishmonger* and *ironmonger*, is of Latin origin; it had a separate existence in Anglo-Saxon, with the general meaning 'a trader'. These words give some indication of the impact of Roman life, in religion, in commerce and in military matters, on the native Britons before the Saxons came. Most of them come from what is known as Late Latin—that is, Latin as it was spoken and written from about A.D. 175 to A.D. 600. For 'Classical' Latin (75 B.C.—A.D. 175), which we now look upon as a dead language, was, of course, once living, and underwent changes like our own. Indeed, in one sense it still lives in the modern languages derived from it, such as French, Spanish and Italian. We are reminded of this by the fact that the French word for 'horse', *cheval*, is derived not from the Classical Latin *equus* but from the Low or Late Latin *caballus*, and the origin of *tête* ('head') is not the Classical Latin *caput*, but a soldier's slang word *testa*, meaning 'a tile'.

## XI

During the Middle Ages there were comparatively few direct borrowings from Latin, either Late or Classical; for most of the new words came to us, as we have already seen, in their French form. But in the fifteenth century there occurred the important historical event which we call the Renaissance. The Turks overran Constantinople, the centre of Eastern Christianity and learning; and the scholars made their way to Western Europe, mainly to Italy, bringing with them many of the masterpieces of Classical (Latin and Greek) literature. After a time, the influence of this 'new learning' was felt in England, partly because some of the scholars settled down in the two Universities, Oxford and Cambridge, or in London, and partly because cultured Englishmen of wealth and leisure on their European travels made actual contact with others in Rome and elsewhere. Thus the language was enriched with a new literary vocabulary of words derived or adapted from Latin roots,\* and often, though not always, built up with Latin prefixes and suffixes. The coming of these new words endowed English with an extraordinary vigour and freshness, which it has never since regained. During the age of Elizabeth, with its mental and physical excitements, its looking out (like the boy Raleigh in the famous picture) on new horizons, men used words for the sheer joy of it; they played with them, banded them about, loved them for their own sake, delighted in their very sound and euphony. In language, as in other ways of life, they had come, like children, upon a strange and wonderful world.

Sometimes, of course, the sense of novelty tended to go too far. A writer of the period, bemoaning (as men still do) the loss of native English words, said this: 'Which default whenas some endeavoured to salve and recure, they patched up the holes with pieces and rags of other languages, borrowing here of the French, there of the Italian, everywhere of the Latine; not weighing how ill those tongues accorde with themselves, but much worse with ours; so now they have made our



English tongue a gallimaufry or hodge-podge of al other speches'. In one of his earliest plays, *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare burlesqued these learned affectations,—though he himself afterwards became the greatest user of the newly enriched language. Here is a passage he puts into the mouth of one of the characters in that play, Holofernes, a pedantic schoolmaster. Holofernes is speaking of a letter in the form of a sonnet which had just come into his hands:

Let me supervise the canzonet. Here are only numbers ratified; but, for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy, *caret*<sup>1</sup> . . . But, damosella virgin, was this directed to you? I will overglance the superscript. . . . I will look again on the intellect of the letter, for the nomination of the party writing to the person written unto: 'Your ladyship's in all desired employment, Biron.' Sir Nathaniel, this Biron is one of the votaries with the king; and here he hath framed a letter to a sequent of the stranger queen's, which, accidentally, or by the way of progression, hath miscarried.

It is not difficult to recognise that that is not plain English, but a 'gallimaufry and hodge-podge' of other languages. Most of the strange words in the passage are of Latin origin, though two of them, *canzonet* and *damosella*, belong to Italian, a fashionable language in Shakespeare's time. The language is artificial and false because it is not that which naturally developed in the speech and writing of Englishmen.

From time to time other writers who were jealous for the language—or jealous of one another—objected to the newcomers, some of which, like *scientific*, *methodical*, *penetrate*, *function*, *figurative* and *obscure*, are now among the most familiar words in our vocabulary. Perhaps the most entertaining objection is to be found in Ben Jonson's play *The Poetaster*, where the Bad Poet is forced to vomit up the latest novelties he has been guilty of. Here are some of them: *retrograde*, *spurious*, *strenuous*, *conscious*, *defunct*, *reciprocal*,

<sup>1</sup> I.e. it is missing.

*obstupefact*, *turgidous* and *prorump*. Of these the first six have established themselves; the other three have been lost altogether—perhaps deservedly, though *obstupefact* seems too good to be true.

## XII

## c

Words of Saxon and Latin origin (direct, or through French) make up perhaps ninety per cent. of our working vocabulary. The other ten per cent. have come to us from the four corners of the earth. To begin with, we should expect that the Anglo-Saxons would have taken some words from the Britons, whom they conquered and drove westward into Wales and Cornwall. Probably the invasion was too ruthless for this, or, as Jespersen suggests, conquerors do not usually borrow from the language of the conquered. Anyhow, only a very few remain to remind us of that Celtic race which once inhabited this island. Two of the most familiar are the proper noun *Wales* and the word *down* meaning 'a hill'. But British words are often buried, in a disguised form, in place-names. Professor Weekley (*Something About Words*, Ch. XI) gives the example *Churchill*, which has no connexion with *church*, but is made up of the Celtic *cruc*, itself meaning a hill, and the Saxon word *hill*. The name itself is, therefore, a Celtic-Saxon doublet, meaning 'hill-hill'. A few Celtic words were, curiously enough, first adopted into the French and so came into English by a roundabout way after the Conquest. *Car* (see also page 78) is an interesting example, ultimately from the Celtic *karros*, 'a wheeled vehicle'. With it came its own derivatives *carpenter*, *carry*, *career* and *cargo*. Other words of this origin are *gravel* and *mutton*. From the modern counterpart of the Celtic, Welsh, only one word has become popularised in English—*eisteddfod* (1882), which means literally a sitting, or session, of Welsh bards.

## XIII

The other European people (apart from the Romans) who influenced the language in Anglo-Saxon times were the Danes.

Some of the words they gave us, like *law*, *take*, *call*, and *sister*, which is derived not from the Anglo-Saxon *sweoster*, but from the Norse form *syster*, are among the most familiar in English. Another example is the word *gate*, meaning a 'way' or a 'road', which is probably not connected etymologically with our ordinary English word *gate*. It survives in the names of a number of streets in York, a northern city, which naturally at the invasion period had close contact with the Danes. There was also an adverb *algates*, sometimes used by Shakespeare, which is the equivalent of the English *always*. More interesting is *odd*, which comes from a Scandinavian word *odda*, the possessive form of the word *oddi*, meaning 'point' or 'triangle', and hence the third or 'odd' number. From Scandinavian too, we get the word *egg*. The medieval form, derived regularly from the Saxon, was *ey*. Chaucer has it (Nun's Priest's Tale):

Hir bord was served most with whyt and blak,  
Milk and broun breed, in which she fond no lak,  
Seynd bacoun, and somtyme an *ey* or tweye.

Caxton, writing in the middle of the fifteenth century, has an interesting comment to make on the change:

And certaynly our language now used varyeth ferre from that whiche was used and spoken whan I was borne. For we englysshe men ben borpe under the domynacyon of the mone, which is never stedfaste, but ever waverynge, wexyng one season, and waneth & dyscreaseth another season. And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shhyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in tamyse, for to have sayled over the see into zelande. And for lacke of wynde, they taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them. And one of theym named sheffelde, a mercer, cam in-to an hows and axed for mete; and specyally he axyd after eggys. And the goode wyf answerde, that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude

speke no frenshe, but wolde have hadde egges, and she understode hym not. And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde have eyren. Then the good wyf sayd that he understod hym wel. Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, egges or eyren. Certaynly it is harde to playse every man, by cause of dyversite & chaunge of langage.

Soon after this was written, the form *egg* established itself, and *ey*, *eyren*, were lost to the language.

But above all, we owe to the Danes the modern forms of the third person pronoun (plural), *they*—*them*—*their*, which took the place of the Saxon *hie*—*hem*—*hiera*, though these forms, with slight changes, are consistently used by Chaucer. Several other Scandinavian derivatives are referred to elsewhere in this book.

## XIV

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Crusaders brought back a number of words from the East. Two of the most important are *cotton* (from the Arabic *qutn*) and *sugar* (from Arabic *sukker*). Another interesting one is *assassin*, from the Arabic word *hashshashin*, which means 'hashish eaters', and originates from the fact that the murderers of the Christian leaders intoxicated themselves with hashish. To these must be added *orange*, *damask*, *bazard* (which are dealt with elsewhere)<sup>1</sup> and some names of colours, like *scarlet* and *azure*, the latter of which occurs in Chaucer:

Lyk *asur* were his legges and his tun.

These came, however, not direct into the native language, but by the ordinary channels of the Norman-French; that is to say, they were part of that French vocabulary which, as we have already seen, was welded with the Saxon during the Middle Ages.

It was not until the late fifteenth century, with the coming of the Tudors, that England began to make new and important

contacts with the outside world. From then onwards, through exploration, commerce, art and war, she took an ever-growing place among the nations of the earth. And with her development, first as a national power, then as an empire, her language developed also.

We see, for example, how her men of culture gathered new terms relating to their various arts from the nations of Europe. Thus Shakespeare reminds us that the word *stanza*—or as he spells it, *stanzo*—was a new word in his time. 'Come, more,' cries the melancholy Jaques (in *As You Like It*) to the Duke of Amiens, who has just been singing a song, 'another stanza; call you them stanzos?' This word was derived from Italian, in which it meant 'a chamber', or 'a room', and so, by association, a little space or section of verse. Another word of Italian origin is *novel*. *Novella*, which means 'news' or 'new things', was applied to each of the prose stories in the Italian poet Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a collection that has its English parallel in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Etymologically, therefore, it would be correct to say that each of Chaucer's tales is a novel. But the word has since been applied to a type of prose literature that developed later in English. It has, in fact, undergone a change of meaning that, as we shall see later, is characteristic of the language. Another literary borrowing from the Italian is *canto*, 'a song', which is used (as in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*) for a division of a long poem.

From Italy, too, come most of our musical terms, such as *solo*, *alto*, *tenor*, *bass*, *cantata*, and *oratorio*, a word which was first applied to a musical work performed in the oratory of St. Philip Neri. And to these may be added the words used technically in musical scores—*allegro*, *diminuendo*, *crescendo* and the like—some of which, especially *crescendo*, have taken their place, with associated or metaphorical meaning, in the ordinary language. *Violin*, *piano* and *violoncello*, now commonly contracted to *cello* (see page 92), also come from Italy. One or two terms in painting are Italian, notably *fresco*, a painting 'executed on mortar or plaster still fresh and moist' (Weekley), and, through French, *bas-relief*. Dutch also gave

us a few. Of these *easel* is the most familiar; others are *landscape*, though this word existed in another form in Anglo-Saxon (see page 107), and the technical term *maulstick*.

## XV

The contacts made by the nation in war have always had an interesting influence on vocabulary, both direct and indirect. We have already seen how the Danes, during the wars in King Alfred's time and their brief occupation of the country, brought certain familiar words into the language; and how others, less familiar, were introduced from the East by the Crusaders. Since the medieval period England has been engaged in three great European wars, one with Spain, one with France, and one with Germany. From each of these there has been an influx of new words, some of which, however, were no more than soldiers' slang and failed to establish themselves in the language. In Shakespeare's time, for example, the Spanish words *armada* and *galleon* became familiar, just as did the German words *blitz* (short for *blitzkrieg*, 'lightning war') and *luftwaffe* in our own day. From the period of the Napoleonic wars we obtained words, not so much connected with the war as with the political aspects of the French Revolution, which gave rise to it. *Royalist*, *aristocrat*, *democrat*, and *conscription* in its present meaning belong to this date. Similar importations in our own day are *nazism* and *führer* (from Germany), *fascism* and *duce* (from Italy), and *totalitarian* in the phrase *totalitarian state*.

More directly, the vocabulary of war itself has marched in step with the development of the arts, engines and technique of war. During the Middle Ages the old Saxon terms were for the most part replaced by French equivalents: *war*, *battle*, *army* (for the Saxon *fyrð*), *cavalry*, *cannon*, and many others. Other words, like *drill*, *furlough*, and *onslaught* come to us from the Dutch at the time of the seventeenth-century wars in the Low Countries. One deceptive phrase belongs to this group—*forlorn hope*—which is the Dutch *verloren hoop*,

'lost band' (of soldiers). Other words, like *parade* and *fusilier*, together with such technical terms as were bandied about by Corporal Trim and Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy*, came from the scientific vocabulary of warfare that developed in France during the seventeenth century. In later times we obtained the familiar *khaki*, which is a Persian word meaning 'dust-coloured'. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* dates it 1857, and gives a quotation 'The infantry were dressed in khakee' dated 1859.

A melancholy chapter of history might be constructed about the dates of words which stand for weapons of war. *Weapon* itself is Saxon, as are *bow*, *arrow* and *sword*. *Gun* may be onomatopœic, representing the sound made by the explosion. The other explanation is that it is from the Icelandic proper name *Gunhilda*, and this is supported (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) by a quotation from a record of munitions at Windsor Castle in 1330—'una magna balista de cornu quae vocatur Domina Gunhilda'. *Bayonet* belongs to the late seventeenth century: the word is probably derived from *Bayonne*, where the weapon was first used. *Torpedo* was originally the name of the cramp-fish, from the Latin *torpere*, to be stiff or numb, from which we also get the adjective *torpid*. It gained its modern meaning in the late eighteenth century. *Rifle* is a little earlier; it takes its name from the 'rifling' or spiral grooving in the barrel. The noun *submarine* in its modern sense first appeared in 1899.

We have had dismal experience in our own time of the multiplicity of modern weapons. Their names are, however, for the most part revivals or adaptations of older words. One of the most interesting is *tank*, adopted in 1916 for the new armoured land-vehicle which, by means of caterpillar wheels, could move over broken country with an attacking army. No doubt the choice of the word was prompted by association with the general shape and appearance of the ordinary water-tank or cistern; at any rate, in its new military sense, it has firmly established itself in the language. Another more obvious revival was *rocket* for a long-range shell or bomb propelled

on the principle of an ordinary firework rocket. To the recent war we also owe such new words, or revivals, as *battle-dress*, *gas-mask*, *respirator*, *evacuee* and *blackout* (see page 79) *warhead* of a projectile, and *alert* as a noun ('the alert has sounded'). The technical vocabulary of army communiqués also gave us words and phrases like *pocket* (of resistance), *pincers* or *scissors movement*, *spearhead* of attack, *mopping-up* operations, *winkling* out troops from a prepared position. It is beyond the scope of this book to treat of the vast number of slang words, often inspired by American usage, which were the stock-in-trade of the armed forces, especially the flying-men. Some of these, like *block-buster* for a bomb especially designed to destroy big buildings, have perhaps come to stay, and may even take on associated meanings; but most of them will, no doubt, like other specialised slang, remain the monopoly of those who coin and use them; though any that are at all commonly used in the press or on the wireless have a chance of becoming part of ordinary colloquial speech.

#### XVI

We have already noted the Elizabethan delight in words for their own sake. Some of the most picturesque acquisitions came from the travellers and explorers, who often introduced the native names of the new commodities they discovered. The two most obvious examples are *potato* and *tobacco*. These, like most of the others, have come to us in their Spanish form. *Potato* is the original Haitian word *batata*; and *tobacco* was originally the name of the tube or pipe through which the plant was smoked, or, according to another theory, a tube of leaves rather like a modern cigar. The Spaniards associated the word with the plant itself, and with that meaning *tobacco* passed into English and other languages. Other words that came to us from the west, through the medium of Spanish, are *chocolate*, *cocoa*, *maize*, *cannibal*, *canoe* and *savannah*. *Alligator* (1563) is an interesting corrupt compound of the Spanish article *el* and *lagarto*, 'a lizard'. Not that Spanish was



the only intermediary language through which such words came to us. *Curry* and *banana*, for example, came through the Portuguese, *bamboo* and *cockatoo* from Malayan through the Dutch, *coffee* and *sofa* from Arabic and *dervish* from Persian through the Turkish. *Moccasin*, *tomahawk*, *kangaroo*, are English adaptations of native words.

## XVII

In a less obvious, but no less interesting way, from the late Middle Ages onwards words were adapted, mainly from French and Latin, to express the new conceptions and ideas which came with a developing civilisation. We have already seen that the chief Saxon survivals in the language to-day are 'concrete' words. True, a number of fundamental 'abstract' words remain, like *love*, *hope*, and *kindness* (see page 61). But for the most part the Saxon words, many of them picturesque compounds, have disappeared,<sup>1</sup> and with the advent of more complex thought, words of Latin, or ultimately Greek origin, passed into the ordinary language mainly from the vocabulary of the bookmen. It is significant, in more ways than one, for example, that the Saxon *witenagemot*, 'the meeting of the wise men', was replaced in de Montfort's time (thirteenth century) by the French word *Parlement*, 'the talking place'. Nowhere is this process better exemplified than in the medieval title 'The Ayenbit of Inwit' ('The Again-Bite of In[ward] Wit'), which we could render literally into Modern English 'The Remorse of Conscience', using the exact Latin equivalents.

During the late Middle Ages a new vocabulary developed in connexion with the arts and philosophy, or science. *Philosophy* itself, *history*, *comedy* and other words connected with the drama, made their way into English during the fourteenth century. The astrologers, in addition to *influence* and *disaster* (see page 71) also gave us *disposition*, which originally meant

<sup>1</sup> Wycliff, however, revived and popularised one old Saxon type of compound, *lovingkindness*, in his translation of the Bible.

the situation or place in the heavens under which a man was born. From the vocabulary of alchemy came *amalgam*, *alembic* (which appears as *limbeck* in Shakespeare), *alkali*, and *alcohol*, all of which, including *alchemy* itself, are ultimately of Arabic origin. *Algebra* comes, through the Italian, from the Arabic *al-jabr*, 'the re-integration of broken parts'; and *cipher* is the Arabic *cifr*, which, in a roundabout way, is cognate with *zero*. From Arabic also comes the word *mufti*, originally used for an official exponent of Mohammedan law in Turkey (hence the 'Grand Mufti' of Jerusalem), and afterwards applied, probably by facetious usage in the nineteenth century, to the unofficial 'civilian' dress of an officer who usually wears uniform.

## XVIII

To one other language—Classical Greek—we owe a peculiar debt. Up to the modern period there was very little direct Greek influence, though there is one outstanding example—the Anglo-Saxon word *cirice* (Modern English 'church') was taken by the Anglo-Saxons, even before they came to Britain, from the Greek *kuriakon*, meaning 'Lord's (house)'. But most Greek words were derived indirectly, either from Latin through French, or through Latin itself. Thus the three words of Latin origin *disciple*, *devil* and *angel*, mentioned on page 14 were the Greek *episkopos*, an 'overseer', *diabolos*, 'a slanderer' and *angelos*, 'a messenger'. Similarly, such old-timers as *geography* (1452) and *geometry*, as well as the far more modern *telegraph* (1794), came to us, not directly from the Greek, but through the French *geographie*, *geometrie* and *telegraphe*. Our direct Greek derivatives are nearly all associated with the technical language of science and philosophy, though many of them have passed into everyday use. Most modern European languages help themselves from the same source. In fact, Professor Lancelot Hogben has recently suggested<sup>1</sup> that, as Greek derivatives are international, a common language could be devised by making words out of those Greek roots and particles

<sup>1</sup> *Interglossa* (Penguin Books).

whose general meaning is familiar to us, as well as to other nations, through the vocabulary of science.

## XIX

It is a remarkable fact that, with all its wealth, English has had to borrow direct from its neighbours many words beyond those which, through its long history, it has assimilated to itself. Such words have never become anglicised; that is to say, they are still 'strangers', keeping for the most part the shape and dress of their original language. Most of them are from French and Latin, though a few come to us from other sources. To the Latin ones we give an English pronunciation; but those from the French we try to pronounce as far as possible in the French way. The few from outlandish languages have usually put on a more or less English form, since in spelling they would be unnaturally bizarre and certainly in pronunciation would be beyond our capacity. We have a simple, and interesting, example in the Norwegian word *ski*, which we borrowed about the end of the nineteenth century. Up to quite recent times, this word was pronounced in the Norwegian fashion, with the *sk* 'soft', that is equivalent to our *sh* ('shee'). The B.B.C., however, declared for an English pronunciation, with the *sk* 'hard', and this is slowly gaining ground, though 'shee' is by no means ousted from ordinary speech. Other borrowings of this type, which may be called 'semi-strangers', are the Arabic *sheikh*, dating from as early as 1577; *rickshaw*, shortened from the Japanese *jinriksha* ('man-power-vehicle'); *hari-kiri*, a corrupt form of Japanese *hara-kiri*, meaning literally 'cut belly', the word for a Japanese method of suicide, which has been given a new lease of life in modern times; and another Japanese term *jujitsu*, (literally 'soft art') for a certain type of gymnastics.

## XX

From modern German we had, up to quite recent times, singularly few 'strangers'. A fairly old-established one is

*kindergarten* ('children's garden'), which was introduced in 1852 for the type of school for infants and young children designed by the German educational reformer, Friedrich Froebel. The Great War of 1914-18 left us the colloquial word *Fritz* for a German soldier, which even then was ousted by the more popular *Jerry*; *zeppelin*, a 'name' word from Count F. von Zeppelin, the inventor (1900) of a particular type of dirigible airship, and *kultur*, which is admitted to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* with the comment 'applied derisively to German civilisation, especially with reference to their methods of warfare'. But from the later war against Germany (1939-1945) we gathered quite a little harvest, partly, no doubt, owing to the influence of the wireless bulletins, in which German terms were freely used and generally given their native pronunciation. Whether *reich* ('kingdom'), *luftwaffe* ('air arm'), *lebensraum* ('living room'), *blitz(krieg)* ('lightning war'), *putsch* ('a revolutionary outbreak'), *nazi* (a contraction for *Nationalsozialist*), *führer* ('leader'), and *gestapo* (a contraction for *Geheime Staatspolizei*) and a few other wartime strangers will ever find their way into our dictionaries as borrowings depends partly on the amount of literature, of both fact and fiction, that arises out of the war, and partly on the shape of things to come. The same applies to the one or two Italian borrowings, notably *fascist*, which is, however, anglicised from the Italian *facisti*, and *duce* ('leader'), the title assumed by Mussolini. With this latter we may compare the much earlier borrowing *doge* for the 'leader' in the states of Venice and Genoa; unlike *duce*, which is usually pronounced Italian fashion 'duchay', *doge*, dissyllabic in Italian is anglicised as a monosyllable. It is interesting to remember that the English Prime Minister during the war, Mr. Winston Churchill, always anglicised the word *nazi*, which, however, most Englishmen pronounce in the German way, 'nātsi'.

There are a few borrowings from some other modern

European languages, but most of them are semi-technical, and are comparatively rare in ordinary speech. We must note, however, the two comparatively modern Russian importations, *soviet* and *bolshevik*. The first is the Russian word for a workmen's council, and the second is the comparative form of the adjective *bolsboy*, 'big', referring to the extreme wing of the Socialist, later the Communist, party, which became supreme ('bigger than all the rest') after the Revolution of 1917. Both words were immediately adopted into English, being dated 1917 in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

But it is natural that we should borrow freely from our nearest neighbour, France. We have already seen how our English vocabulary contains a great number of French words which, usually changed in form and pronunciation, have become part and parcel of the language. Those which are 'strangers' have come to us in more modern times. Some of them are necessary, since they express a meaning, a subtle significance, which cannot be expressed by any existing English word. Others, usually introduced and favoured by people who have a mind to air their French, are not so much strangers as intruders, which should be denied our somewhat indiscriminate hospitality.

It is interesting to study, first of all, a few of those which have so established themselves as to become naturalised aliens. We have, for example, the word *précis*, 'a concise or abridged statement; a summary; an abstract' (*S.O.E.D.*). English has the adjective *precise*, but no 'concrete' noun corresponding to it; and there is, indeed, no single word in our language which exactly expresses the meaning. Neither 'summary', nor 'abstract' will do, though they are passable, and necessary, in a dictionary definition such as that quoted above. And what single English word could we substitute for *débris* or *tête-à-tête* or *connoisseur*, or *massage*, or *persiflage*, or *veillee*, or *sabotage* and a score of others? *Sabotage*—a word which has had a new lease of life during the recent troubled years—has a history of its own. It is a late importation (1910), and refers to the throwing of wooden shoes (*sabots*) into machinery in order to

put it out of action. We have a parallel colloquialism 'to throw a spanner into the works', which is, however, generally used metaphorically.

Some of the examples quoted have, in fact, become so familiar that we almost forget they are strangers at all. There are others which have achieved naturalisation even though it would seem that a native substitute was possible. We have two examples from the vocabulary which developed with the motor-car age—*chauffeur* (1899) and *garage* (1902). For the first, *motor-driver* would seem to be a suitable synonym, and for the second *motor-shed*. But here, as always, other linguistic influences are at work. To-day *chauffeur* distinguishes the professional from the non-professional 'driver'; the word, by the way, which means literally 'fireman' or 'stoker', dates from the time when the motor-car was steam-driven. As for *garage*, it is now applied to not only the private 'motor-shed' but also to the public repairing establishment and petrol station. The stranger has, as it were, been forced to do overtime in the absence of a native to share its labours. *Hangar*, for a covered shed, is a similar borrowing, and dates from the mid-nineteenth century; its present meaning, shed for aeroplanes, developed as early as 1902.

Another borrowing, *charabanc*, has an interesting history. It is the French word *char-à-bancs* ('car with benches') and was introduced into English as early as 1832. But it did not become popular until the period immediately following the war of 1914-18, with the development of pleasure motoring. In spelling and pronunciation the word has undergone certain changes. Quite early the final *s* of the French was dropped, leaving the form *char-à-banc* (*S.O.E.D.*) which in more recent times has been anglicised as *charabanc*. The French plural *chars-à-bancs* has never been adopted in English, which has the illogical form *charabancs*. Pronunciation has never been fixed; in the main, 'sharrabong', with an attempt at the French nasal, and 'sharrabang', which remembers the French only in its soft *ch*, hold the field. Mr. Walter de la Mare once suggested the pleasant corruption *cheerybang*.

The remarkable thing is that *char-à-bancs* is, in fact, an obsolete, or at any rate an obsolescent, word in modern French, which has instead the term *auto-car*. And, indeed, there are signs that it is dropping out of use in English. The nineteenth century had the simple native word *brake* for the corresponding type of (horse-drawn) vehicle. To-day we have evolved the natural and quite manageable compound *motor-coach*, which is already establishing itself to the gradual exclusion of the somewhat unmanageable stranger.

It has seemed worth while to consider this word in some detail because its fortunes in English are to some extent shared by certain other borrowings from the French. *Nom de plume*, for example, is not French at all; the correct phrase is *nom de guerre*. So we have the queer paradox that *nom de plume* is bad French but perfectly good English. Indeed, so strange are the ways of language, it is better English than its obvious equivalent *pen-name*, which is admitted to the S.O.E.D. only as a translation of *nom de plume*. A somewhat similar confusion exists in connexion with the word *morale*, which is dealt with on page 127.

Some French borrowings illustrate a tendency in language which may be called 'linguistic snobbery'. *Charabanc* itself is a mild example; it was what Fowler calls a 'genteelism' for a brake, a word that smacked too much, among those who had their smattering of French, of Margate and Hampstead Heath. Better examples are *café* and *restaurant*, both of which belong to the early nineteenth century. *Coffee-house* and *ordinary* were the eighteenth-century terms; the second has now become obsolete, and the first has suffered a notable loss of caste since the days of Dryden, Johnson and Swift. *Brasserie* (French 'brewery') and *buffet* are modern 'snob' borrowings for a refreshment saloon or bar. The English *eating-house* is far down the social scale, though *road-house* is by now pretty well established for the kind of country restaurant much frequented by those who would probably call themselves the *élite*.

Many of these 'snob' words belong to the nineteenth century. One of the most unfortunate is *fiancé(e)* (1853), which has now

almost succeeded in banishing the apt and beautiful English word *betrothed*. Still, the custom of language cannot be set aside; *fiancé(e)* is now the accepted word, and *betrothed* as a noun, and even as a verb, belongs to the past. Indeed, once a stranger has gained a firm footing, it is almost impossible to rid ourselves of it. To make a translation, as we have seen in the case of *pen-name*, is no solution at all. Moreover, just as in the early growth of the language a French derivative remained side by side with a Saxon original to give us two words with differentiated meaning (see page 48), so the modern stranger may co-exist with an English 'synonym', and have a particular meaning and use of its own. Thus *menu* and *bill of fare*, *ennui* and *boredom*, *bizarre* and *strange*, *naïve* and *simple*, though in general synonymous terms, are in fact subtly distinguished in meaning; there is room in the language for both the stranger and the native. The legitimate borrowing expresses a *nuance* (itself a French term which is untranslatable) that cannot be expressed by any apparent English equivalent. We have a very modern example in the word *compère*, originally the French 'godfather', and afterwards used for an announcer in a revue. It is a desirable alien merely because there is no convenient English 'synonym'. *Announcer* has, in these days, other associations, and 'director of entertainment' (*Chambers*) is altogether too cumbersome for both tongue and pen.

On French borrowings in general Fowler (*M.E.U.*) has some pertinent things to say. He makes a list of some thousand words and phrases, and says of them, 'none can be prohibited and almost none can be given unconditional licences; it is all a matter of the audience and the occasion.' Some belong, for example, to the particularised vocabulary of some department of life—*causerie* to literature and journalism, *entr'acte* to music and the theatre, *bors-d'œuvre* to cookery, *lycée* to what he terms 'local colour and travel'. But how difficult it is to decide which are desirable and which undesirable aliens may be gathered from one of Fowler's own classifications. He includes under the heading 'needless substitutes for English words' *cul-de-sac*, *en route*, and *brochure*. But it is difficult to imagine



what English words he has in mind. 'Blind alley' or 'blind road', 'on the way (to)' or (absolutely) 'on the way', and 'pamphlet' are not, respectively, happy or even adequate substitutes for the three words cited. It would seem that here Fowler himself became, to quote his own phrase, a faddist 'engaged in alien-hunting'.

## XXII

Borrowings from the Latin do not present the same problems as those from the French. To begin with, the difficulty of pronunciation does not arise; and Latin words which have established themselves in the popular language, like *index*, *terminus*, *formula*, are so much part of English that they almost lose their foreign air. Others have a natural and legitimate place in the learned vocabulary, and among technical terms, especially in law and science. A few come to us direct from legal documents. Thus *quorum* ('of whom') is the first word occurring in commissions appointing certain persons 'quorum vos unum (duos, etc.) esse volumus'—'of whom we desire you to be one (two, etc.)'. In modern English it means the number required to be present before the business can be transacted. We may place in this category the word *premise* or *premiss*. It is derived, through French, from the Latin *praemissa*, which occurred in a medieval formula of logic, 'praemissa propositio', the proposition sent forward or stated; and survives as a logical term, with the spelling in *-iss*. A later development, however, is more interesting. In conveyances of land the word was often used (like our English *aforesaid*) to avoid the repetition of conditions already laid down. Then, by association it was applied to buildings on the land actually conveyed, and exists to-day in the anglicised plural form *premises*.

Other Latin borrowings which have established themselves almost as natives are the gerund formations *agenda*, 'things to be done' and *referendum* (1882) 'matter to be referred'; the phrases *bona fide*, *in medias res*, *vice versa*, *in loco parentis*; and certain words or phrases which are better known as contractions or initial letters, like *videlicet* ('it is allowed to see'),

usually shortened to *viz*, *id est* ('that is') and *exempli gratia* ('for the sake of example'), which we reduce to *i.e.* and *e.g.* respectively.

## XXIII

A few old words keep a precarious footing in the living language because they have been used fitfully by writers, especially in poetry, long after they had become lost to current speech. Thus we have archaic adverbial and prepositional forms like *ere* for *before*, *eke* for *also*, *ilk* for *the same* (in the phrase 'of that ilk', that is, of the same tribe), *albeit* for *although*, *whilom* for *once*, and *withal* for the adverb *with*. Poets have kept alive the Saxon *yclept*, the past participle of the old verb *clīpian*, to call, to name, with the characteristic particle *y-* (A.-S. *ge-* see page 91) and the past tense *quoth*, from A.-S. *cwæp*, spoke. *Efte* and its adverbial *eftsoons* are the part of the stock-in-trade of imitative ballad-mongers. Coleridge, for example, has *eftsoons* in the *Ancient Mariner*. The Authorised Version (1611) has kept half-alive parts of the Saxon verb *witan*, to know: '*Wot* ye not that such a man as I can certainly divine?'; 'He *wist* not that the Lord had departed from him'. It is from this root that we get our nouns *wit* and *wisdom* and the adjective *wise*. To the Prayer Book of Edward VI we owe the survival of the noun *let*, in the characteristic parallelism 'without let or hindrance'. Shakespeare has the verbal form 'By Heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that *lets* (i.e. 'hinders') me'. This word survives as a living word in the vocabulary of tennis and one or two other games. A let (in tennis, for example) is a hindrance in the play. Other fitful survivals are *neat* for 'cattle', often used in legal language, and *welkin*, one of the Saxon terms (see page 47) for sky. It is common in Shakespeare; and Feste the Clown, in *Twelfth Night*, uses it metaphorically as a synonym for *element*, in the phrase 'out of my element'. Much later, Charles Wesley used it in the opening line of one of his best-known hymns, 'Hark, how all the welkin rings', since altered to 'Hark, the herald angels sing'.

Other words, once common in speech as well as in writing,

survive only in the literary vocabulary. We rarely say, though we may write, the word *weep*; *cry* has taken its place in the spoken language. Similarly, though we may write *May*, *fare*, *woe*, we should almost certainly say *kill*, *enemy*, *grief* or *sorrow*. *Merry* and *mirth* have also passed out of the colloquial language. We still wish each other a merry Christmas, and sometimes use the word in a semi-facetious way to signify 'half-drunk'; but otherwise, except in writing, it is moribund. *Mirth* has fallen into even greater neglect. Perhaps it is indicative of a certain joylessness which has crept into modern life that we no longer use the word in ordinary conversation. There was a time when it was not out of place even in a religious context:

Serve Him with mirth, His praise forth tell,  
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

A few words which once had a literal meaning now remain only in figurative speech. In the medieval rhyme:

When Adam delved and Eve span  
Who was then the gentleman?

*delved* has the sense *digged* (or *dug*—see page 169), and Shakespeare's 'goodman delver' is a grave-digger. But nowadays we delve, not in the soil, but into the past (in thought). *Dwell* is similarly banished to metaphorical use. Feste the Clown, in *Twelfth Night*, could say 'I do dwell at my house and my house doth stand by the church'—though here, it must be admitted, the word is a kind of gloss on 'live', which he uses punningly in the previous sentence 'I live by the church'. Still, the fact remains that *dwell* once had a literal sense, and has it no longer. We now dwell upon a thought and not upon a common or in a city.

Most words, as we have seen, become part of the language because they establish themselves in the common speech.

Nobody can say exactly when they were first used. We only know that, once having been used and bandied about from mouth to mouth, they become popular and are absorbed into the vocabulary. This is, indeed, a process which we may easily observe for ourselves in the language of to-day, especially in connexion with those words which belong to colloquial speech and slang. Familiar examples are *doodle-bug* and *buzz-bomb*, the facetious terms applied to the flying-bombs which bombarded England during 1944. It is, of course, impossible to tell when the words were first used, or who used them; but the fact remains that they rapidly gained currency, no doubt partly because they were happy onomatopœic euphemisms which reflected the cheerful spirit of the people in circumstances of difficulty and danger. But all such words, whether ancient or modern, just 'grow', like Topsy. They have their origin, and afterwards live on, in the ordinary conversation of men and women.

But there are other words to which we can give a local habitation and a name. Many of them we may trace, more or less certainly, to a particular author. Others are the inventions, or adaptations, of scientists or philosophers; and some develop in the changing vocabulary of government and politics. Most great literary men have added at least a few words to the language. They are not, in the true sense, actual creations, but rather deliberate new formations, often from the Latin. For example, one of the great writers of Latinised prose in the seventeenth century, Sir Thomas Browne, bequeathed to the language a whole host of new derivations, many of which have become popularised, including such familiar words as *medical* and *electricity*. Among the many other words which we can nail down to particular writers are *pandemonium* and *sensuous* (Milton), *contour* (John Evelyn), *idealism* (Shelley), *pessimism* (Coleridge) and *picnic* (Lord Chesterfield).

In particular, Burke, the great eighteenth-century orator, gave us a number of words which have established themselves in the vocabulary of politics, including *colonial*, *diplomacy*,

and *electioneering*, all of which reflect the political trends and developments of his own period.

The two most popularised coinages by philosophers are *agnostic* and *altruism*. Of these the first was fashioned from the Greek by Professor T. Huxley (1870) for one who 'believes that anything beyond phenomena . . . is not and cannot be known' (*S.O.E.D.*), and the second by the French philosopher Comte (1853), through the Italian *altrui*, to express the sense 'disinterested regard for others'.

There is a little group of facetious formations that can be traced to particular authors. To Samuel Foote we owe the nonsense word *panjandrum*, usually in the phrase 'the grand panjandrum', for a mysterious or exalted personage. It occurs in a passage he wrote to test the memory of Macklin, the eighteenth-century actor:

And here there were present the Picninnies, and the Joblillies, and the Garyulies, and the Grand Panjandrum himself, with the little round button at top. .

Carlyle, who created words with more gusto than discrimination, has nevertheless left us one or two that have been gathered into the dictionary. Among them is *gigmanity*, for the respectability which is measured by a man's being able to keep a gig; but the word has lost currency with the passage of time. It is not surprising that one of the greatest masters of pure nonsense in English, Lewis Carroll, should leave us the legacy of a word or two. The most popular of them are *chortle* and *galumph*, both of which occur in Humpty Dumpty's poem in *Through the Looking Glass*. Humpty Dumpty himself explained to Alice that 'they were like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up in one word'. In *chortle* are packed up *chuckle* and *snort*, in *galumph* the words *triumph* and *gallop*. Other pseudo-portmanteau words (as they are now called) have since been manufactured. Perhaps the most familiar of them (though it is now somewhat dated) is *squarson*, for the 'squire-parson' of a village. We have a similar formation in the title *Bakerloo* (Railway), which stands for Baker Street

-Waterloo. Here, too, may be noted the useful colloquialism *umpteenth*, which originated in Army slang during the war of 1914-18.

## XXV

The most interesting invention in the vocabulary of science is the word *gas*, which was coined by the Dutch scientist von Helmont (1577-1644), and was afterwards adopted into most European languages. It is not a true creation, however, since it was suggested by the Greek word *chaos*; but it has the advantage of being simple and onomatopœic. To Robert Boyle, the propounder of the famous 'Boyle's law', we owe a number of scientific terms which have become part of our common stock, including *pendulum*, *pathological* and *corpuscle*. Three interesting modern examples are *radium*, the name given (1900) to the new element discovered by Professor and Madame Curie; *insulin* (1922), the name bestowed by its discoverer on a fluid extracted from the islets (Latin *insula*) in the pancreas of animals, and used in the treatment of diabetes; and, during the last few years, *penicillin* (Lat. *penicillum*, 'a brush'.<sup>1</sup>)

## XXVI

Sometimes trade words are adopted, as common nouns, into the ordinary language. The outstanding example is *kodak*, an invention of Mr. G. Eastman (1888) as a name for his new portable camera. Many others which have become household words in colloquial speech still await admittance to the dictionary. *Bovril*, for example, is in *Chambers* (1943), though it has not the sanction of the *S.O.E.D.* Its second element *-vрил* is traced to a word that occurs in Lytton's novel *The Coming Race* (1871), meaning 'the electric fluid represented as the one common origin of the forces in matter'. Still more modern is *cellophane*, a trade name for transparent wrapping, coined from *cellulose* and the Greek *phanos*, 'bright'.

<sup>1</sup> The mould develops organs resembling a brush.

## • XXVII

We may note also those common associations, or synonymous and antonymous parallelisms, which have always been characteristic of English speech—such phrases as ‘safe and sound’, ‘hot and strong’, ‘dust and ashes’, ‘beg and pray’, ‘hearth and home’, ‘to and fro’, ‘kith and kin’, ‘time and tide’, ‘watch and ward’, ‘smoke and smother’. They are interesting survivals of an instinctive emphatic mode of language, often, though by no means always, associated with alliteration. Some of them, like ‘smoke and smother’ and ‘kith and kin’, enshrine archaic words, and others like ‘time and tide’ a word in its older and no longer current sense (see page 8). There are, too, such stereotyped comparisons as ‘brown as a berry’ (which occurs in Chaucer), ‘true as steel’, ‘black as ink’, ‘strong as a lion’, ‘white as snow’. Sometimes a word survives only in one association. We have an interesting example in the verb *wax* (Anglo-Saxon *weacsian*, ‘grow’), which is now used only of the moon, though it has a general sense in the Authorised Version, whose phrase ‘Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked’ has indeed given rise to similar phrases, like ‘wax furious’ and ‘wax indignant’ that still hold a somewhat precarious place in the language. Another example is the adjective *boon* in the single phrase ‘a boon companion’. The noun *boon* (French *bon*, ‘good’) survives as a semi-archaism, but the adjective is limited to the use already quoted. So we speak of ‘carking care’, ‘stark naked’, and ‘a moot point, or question’, in which we have an attributive use of the noun *moot*, a ‘meeting’ for discussion or debate.

But besides such phrases and usages we have the whole body of proverbial speech, the treatment of which is outside the scope of this book. The reader is referred to the *Oxford Book of Proverbs*, a treasure-house of those ‘wise saws and modern instances’ which have, in the course of generations, become part and parcel of the popular, and to some extent, the literary language. Like words themselves, they reflect the life of the age in which they were born. Most of them

belong to the racy and figurative speech of the past. Proverbial expression was characteristic too of early literature in our own and in other tongues. We have as examples the Hebrew Book of Proverbs and other passages included in the Bible and the Apocrypha; and a considerable part of Anglo-Saxon writing, in both prose and verse, is of the proverbial or gnomic type. For proverbs, like idioms and, indeed, metaphor generally, form part of that pictorial expression which is of the very stuff of living speech and writing. They are, to quote a phrase Lamb used in another connexion, 'great Nature's stereotypes'.

Those word associations which are of natural growth are, however, by no means the only ones with which the language is enriched. We have already seen how individual writers or speakers have, by actual creation or adaptation, added words to the common vocabulary. It is, of course, a far more common thing for them to strike out, as it were, phrases and expressions which have become the heritage of us all. Such phrases are more than quotations with which we may illustrate or vivify our own speech and writing; they have become woven into the texture of the language, so that when we use them we are not conscious, though we may be aware, of their origin in the work of some particular author.

## XXVIII

We shall see (page 192) how we owe to the Authorised Version (1611) many expressions 'which were originally, or have since become, metaphorical and idiomatic. The influence of that great translation on our language generally cannot, indeed, be over-estimated, though Mr. Somerset Maugham<sup>1</sup> has ventured to suggest that it has not been an unmixed blessing. Still, there is no doubt that, as Trevelyan suggests, the language as well as the religious content of the Bible permeated English life for a century after Tyndale, who was the chief individual inspiration of the official translators; and ordinary men and women, unversed for the most part in any

<sup>1</sup> In *The Summing Up*.



other literature, absorbed into their very thought its beautiful and pungent and, in the best sense, 'homely' phrases, which they themselves—unconsciously perhaps—passed on as the current coin of the language.

It is quite impossible to catalogue all the expressions in common use which have their origin in the Authorised Version. A few have already been noted. But we may turn almost anywhere and find others, often with surprise, since they have had for over three centuries an independent life of their own in the vocabulary of men and women. If, for example, we read the very first chapter of the Bible we happen on the phrase 'the lesser light', there used literally of the moon, but since used figuratively of a person in an inferior or subordinate position. Or, again, if we turn to one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, the twenty-third psalm, we find such familiar phrases as 'green pastures', 'still waters', 'the valley of the shadow of death'. The gospels give us the phrases 'the loaves and the fishes', often used for material, as distinct from, spiritual things, 'the prodigal son' and 'riotous living', 'a light under a bushel', 'the good Samaritan', '(a house) built on the sand', and several others. From the Book of the Revelation we get 'a new heaven and a new earth'; from Isaiah 'beauty for ashes'; from Job 'the skin of my teeth'; from Saint Paul 'put away childish things' and 'the race set before us'; from the Epistle to the Hebrews 'the cloud of witnesses'. These are but a few of the many that have entered into our speech, and the still greater number that have become part of the written language.

The beautiful balanced rhythms of the English Prayer Book are generally, rather than particularly, memorable, familiar as they are through the use of successive generations. We remember, that is, whole collects and prayers, but have taken only an occasional phrase from them into our common speech. 'We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done'—a balanced, or antithetical sentence characteristic of the Prayer Book—may be said to have established

itself as part of our familiar expression; so may 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest', and a few synonymous parallelisms like 'pray and beseech', 'erred and strayed', 'requisite and necessary'. But we may say generally, as of the Authorised Version, that the idiom of the Prayer Book has been woven into the very texture of the language, and we adapt it, even when we do not, either consciously or unconsciously quote it word for word.

## XXIX

The lady who said *Hamlet* was 'all quotations' was guilty of a gross, but pardonable, exaggeration. But her remark serves to remind us that we have in Shakespeare not only those memorable passages of both prose and verse which have become part of our literary heritage, but also many phrases—reminiscent no doubt of the common speech of his time and fashioned for permanence by his own genius—which have gained a general currency in our speech. Most of the plays furnish examples; it will be convenient, however, to refer to only one play—*Hamlet* itself. Here we find many phrases which (to borrow an example from another play) have become 'familiar in our mouths as household words'. They include 'for this relief much thanks', 'more in sorrow than in anger', 'the steep and thorny way to heaven', 'more honour'd in the breach than the observance', 'the time is out of joint', 'the play's the thing', 'to the manner born', 'caviare to the general', 'our withers are unwrung', 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', 'a consummation devoutly to be wished', 'hoist with his own petard'. These are not, it should be noted, 'Shakespearean quotations' in the limited sense; they are expressions which we use—often without conscious knowledge of their origin—in ordinary speech and writing, sometimes with a meaning far removed from that which belonged to them in their original context. Now and then, even, we misquote, or alter and adapt Shakespeare's actual words. Again we may find our illustration in *Hamlet*: when we use

the expression 'method in his madness', we telescope into a concise and pithy phrase—the observation of Polonius 'Though this be madness, yet there's method in't' (*Hamlet*, ii. 2. 211).

Shakespeare has given us far more stereotyped phrases of this kind than any other author, probably for a reason that has already been hinted at in this book—that the language in his time was in a peculiarly virile state, and expressions struck out by the master coiner naturally gained a permanent currency. However, other poets—and, less frequently, prose writers—have added their quota. It is somewhat surprising that Milton, with his learned and highly stylised diction, has added several familiar phrases to the vocabulary. *L'Allegro* gives us 'the light fantastic toe', *Il Penseroso* 'dim religious light', *Lycidas* 'fresh woods and pastures new', often misquoted 'fresh fields—', and *Paradise Lost* such pregnant phrases as 'precious bane', 'darkness visible' and 'bad eminence', in all of which Milton makes fine use of oxymoron, the figure in which two words of contrasted or even contradictory meaning are effectively associated.

From the eighteenth-century poets, whose style was often epigrammatic, we derive several examples. Gray gives us 'born to blush unseen', 'the inevitable hour', 'far from the madding crowd' (adapted from the complete line 'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'), all in the *Elegy*, and 'where ignorance is bliss' in the *Eton Ode*. To Young's *Night Thoughts* we owe 'Procrastination is the thief of time', a maxim that has become not so much a familiar phrase as a proverb. Cowper gives us 'the cup that cheers', Goldsmith 'the more he gave away the more he had', and Johnson 'to point a moral'. From Pope we get actual quotations, usually of complete couplets, rather than phrases that can be said to have entered the language independently of their context; but 'hope springs eternal' and 'the proper study of mankind' are current among many who would be at a loss to complete the epigrams concerned. To him we owe also the expression 'poetic justice'. Other phrases we get from eighteenth-century writers are 'Distance lends enchantment to the view' (Campbell)

and 'rich beyond the dreams of avarice', which occurs in a now forgotten play called *The Gamester* by Edward Moore. 'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb' appears in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, but is adapted from a proverb that is common to many languages; as is 'Honesty is the best policy', which was first cast into that particular form by Benjamin Franklin.

Of later writers, Wordsworth gives us 'The child is father of the man', 'thoughts too deep for tears', 'the light that never was on sea or land'; Coleridge 'a sadder and a wiser man' and 'the milk of Paradise'; Keats 'a thing of beauty', 'Beauty is truth', and 'faery lands forlorn'; Tennyson 'primeval slime', 'sweet and low', 'Tis better to have loved and lost'; Browning 'the little more and how much it is' and 'the first fine careless rapture', Arnold 'abide our question', Brooke 'that is for ever England', Housman 'the coloured counties'.

### XXX

We have also many phrases coined by statesmen and other notable men, usually in actual speech. Examples of these are Sir Robert Walpole's 'All men have their price', a cynicism which was, however, of ancient origin, Burke's 'the plain highway of finance', and Mr. Asquith's 'Wait and see'. The War of 1914-18 gave us, from Viscount Grey, 'The lights are going out all over Europe', and from Mr. Lloyd George 'Homes fit for heroes'; and the recent war Mr. Churchill's 'sweat, blood, toil and tears'. Broadcasting has increased the power of the spoken word, and it is likely that some of its 'catch phrases', from all sections of the programmes, will remain in the language.

These examples are, of course, only a very few of the hundreds that might be cited. But they illustrate sufficiently the fact that, like words themselves, combinations of words in phrases or sentences take their own individual place in the language; and though their origins are often literary, many of them arise spontaneously and naturally out of the common speech of us all.

## CHAPTER II

### MEANING

'Then you should say what you mean', the Mad Hatter went on. 'I do', Alice hastily replied; 'at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know'. 'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter.

WE have tried to answer the question 'Where do our words come from?' Now we have to tackle the far more complicated, and even more interesting, question of meaning. To begin with, it is obvious that (except by gestures or pictures) we can express the meaning of a word only by using other words; and if our original word is a simple one, we are naturally in difficulties. There is a famous example in the first great English Dictionary, compiled by Doctor Johnson. Johnson had to define *network*, and this is how he did it:

Anything reticulated or decussated, with interstices between the reticulations.

Of course, every dictionary-maker is faced with the same problem, though in trying to solve it he does not usually resort to such long and learned terms. But often he cannot avoid writing his definitions in roundabout language. That is why they are sometimes amusing to read—indeed, looked at from one angle, a dictionary is quite a humorous book. To take one example, this is how the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a table:

article of furniture consisting of flat top of wood or marble etc., and one or more usually vertical supports, especially one on which meals are laid out, articles of use or ornament kept, work done, or games played.

Such a definition (and there are many like it in any dictionary) is so cumbersome as almost to be funny. All the same, it is difficult to see, if it is to be exact and complete, how it could be shortened or improved upon.

## II

But first we must recognise two fundamental and complementary principles that underlie all meaning. The first is this: that a single meaning may often be expressed by more than one word; and the second, that most words have more than one meaning. With the first we are introduced to a very important element in English, its abundance of synonyms. But here we must beware. If by 'synonyms' we understand words of the same meaning and use, then there are no real synonyms in English at all. No words correspond in every particular. In many contexts they may be used indifferently, though even here good writers will make a careful choice, depending often upon the actual sound of the words in question. But after that they part company, as it were; one will have a shade of meaning, a syntactical or idiomatic usage, that does not belong to the other. If we take any group of so-called synonyms (like *big—great—huge—bulky—large—massive*, or *house—dwelling—mansion—domicile—home*) we can quite easily see that, though they have something in common, each has at least one individual meaning or use of its own that distinguishes it from the rest. English is, indeed, almost embarrassingly rich in words; and although this richness affords us a remarkable flexibility of expression, it presents us with real problems of choice in speech and writing.

The reason for this abundance of synonyms is not difficult to understand when we remember that English is a composite language, drawing its vocabulary from many sources. Even in its simplest (Anglo-Saxon) form, however, it was fairly rich in synonymous words. There were, for example, two distinct words for a star—*tungol* and *steorra*—only one of which has come down to us; and at least three for the sky—*brodor*,

*beofon*, and *wolcen* ('welkin'). *Sky* itself, which came a little later, through the Scandinavian, developed as the general or accepted term, *brodor* dropped out altogether, *welkin*, as we have already seen, gradually became a poetic archaism, and *heaven* took on a religious or Christianised significance ('the dwelling-place of God'), the old physical sense surviving only in the plural *heavens*, which has in Modern English a formal or semi-poetical use. Other examples are *þæth*, *rad* ('road'), *wæg* ('way'), and the early Latin borrowing *strete*, with the specialised sense of a 'paved' Roman road, as we still use it in Watling Street; *tun* ('town'), *burg* ('a walled town or city'), and another borrowing from the Romans, *ceaster* (Latin *castra*, 'camp'), which survives in place names like *Chester* and *Lancaster* but not as a common noun.

## III

But the great flood of Latin derivatives, first through French and afterwards directly from Latin, accounts in the main for our extraordinary wealth of synonyms. We have already seen that Saxon survived as the basic element of our modern language, but that many of its words were replaced by words of Latin origin. Nevertheless, there were almost as many that stood their ground, the result being that we now have two or more words with the same general meaning, where originally, perhaps, only one existed; Saxon and Latin have both made their contribution to the vocabulary. There is no clearer statement of this principle than the grumble Scott puts into the mouth of Gurth and Wamba in *Ivanhoe*, when they complain that while the animals are alive and need tending they are called by their Saxon names, *pig*, *sheep*, *bull*, *cow*, but when they are served up at the tables of the Norman conquerors they take their names from the Normans' language, *pork*, *mutton*, *beef*, *veal*.

That passage illustrates not only the development of synonyms but also a process which is very common in the gradual building up of the language. When a Saxon word was joined

by its French equivalent, both words established themselves, each with a definite meaning and use of its own, so that one did not, in actual fact, trespass on the other. Sometimes, for example, a Saxon word which had a general sense was replaced by a Latin derivative, but itself survived with a restricted meaning. Thus the Saxon word *deor* ('deer') meant an animal of any kind. The line from *King Lear*, 'Rats and mice and such small deer', reminds us that this meaning survived at least until Shakespeare's time. But during the Middle Ages, *beast* (from the French *beste*) became the general word; and later, in the sixteenth century, was joined by the direct Latin derivative *animal*—a word, by the way, which does not appear in the Authorised Version (1611). A similar example is the Saxon *wyrm* ('worm'), which meant any kind of reptile. In *Beowulf* it is regularly used for a dragon, and could in Anglo-Saxon, or even Middle English, represent anything from a frog to a crocodile. *Worm* has now a limited sense, though the old meaning is kept in *slow-worm* and *glow-worm*.

## IV

Here, however, we are dealing with words that, though parallel, are not synonymous in the ordinary sense any longer. Before we return to synonyms proper, it will be convenient to pursue this subject of parallel derivatives a little further. We have already seen that the French words brought by the Normans were themselves, in the main, derived from Latin; and that somewhat later there was a big influx from Latin itself. Now it sometimes happened that a word came to us first in its French and then in its Latin form, so that we have now in English two words from one and the same Latin root. Here is a list of the most important of them:

<i>Latin Root</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>French Word</i>	<i>English</i>
camera	camera	chambre	chamber
comput-are	compute	compter	count
dignit-as	dignity	dainté (Old Fr.)	dainty



<i>Latin Root</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>French Word</i>	<i>English</i>
estimatum	estimate	estimer	esteem
factum	fact	fait	feat
fragil-is	fragile	frêle	frail
indict-are	indict	inditer	indite
legal-is	legal	loyal	loyal
magister	magistrate	maître	master
pauper	pauper	pauvre	poor
regal-is	regal	royal	royal
regul-atum	regulate	rule (Old Fr.)	rule
secur-us	secure	sur	surc
strict-us	strict	estreit (Old Fr.)	strait
traditio-nem	tradition	traison (Old Fr.)	treason

It is obvious that the words in these pairs, though *cognate* (that is, of the same birth) are not synonymous in Modern English. Some of them, it is true, approximate in meaning like *count* and *compute*, *royal* and *regal*, but even between these there is, in most contexts, a clear and obvious distinction. Others have parted company with a vengeance, like *loyal* and *legal*, *treason* and *tradition*. This second pair illustrates vividly the kind of adventure which, as we shall see later, befell many derivative words when they were absorbed into English. The Latin word *tradition* meant literally 'a giving away' or 'a handing over'. But even in Latin its normal meaning was 'a giving up' 'a betrayal'—and it is this sense that has survived in the Old French *traison*, our *treason*. Our word *tradition*, however, reverts to the literal Latin significance, 'a handing down' or 'a giving across' from generation to generation.

Some of the words reveal a difference in function or use, though we can recognise in them a common meaning. Thus the Latin root from which both *strict* and *strait* are derived means 'drawn or bound tight'; they both have approximately the sense of the native word *narrow*. But *strait* is used in the concrete or physical sense ('a strait jacket'; 'the Straits of Dover'), *strict* with a mental or moral significance—'narrow in outlook', 'narrow in attitude to other people'. *Indict* and

*indite* have sharply differentiated meanings but have kept the same pronunciation (*indite*). *Dainty* has moved far away from the Latin derivative *dignity*. In Shakespeare *dainty* means 'scrupulous' or 'particular': 'Let us not be dainty of leave-taking' (*Macbeth*, ii, 3), with which both modern meanings ('of delicate feature' and 'fastidious') have some affinity. An earlier meaning was 'choice' or 'rare'. One of the Paston Letters ends with the apology 'Paper is daintye', that is, 'Paper is scarce'.

## V

Such pairs of words, which are usually called doublets, are not confined to French and Latin derivatives. There are some in native English: *wake* and *watch*, *dike* and *ditch*, *skirt* and *shirt*, *drink* and *drench*, *bake* and *batch*. All these have developed from slightly different forms of the original Anglo-Saxon, one giving us the hard and the other the soft sound of an original (hard) *c*, according to certain fundamental principles of sound, or phonology. Among them, *batch* is of special interest; it originally meant 'a baking of loaves', that is, the number turned out at any one time; and so came to mean a quantity or lot of anything. *Skirt* is from an Old Norse form *skyrtá*; and *shirt* has the same Teutonic origin, but developed through the Anglo-Saxon *scyrte*, with a soft *sc*. Both words are probably of the same origin as *short*.

## VI

There is one other interesting little group of doublets. Most of the French derivatives during the Middle Ages were, naturally, from words that belonged to the Norman, or Northern French, dialect. Later on, certain words were borrowed over again, this time from the Central French dialect, whose pronunciation differed in some respects from the Northern: the Central had *ch* for the Northern hard *c*; *s* for *ch*; *j* for *g*; and *gu* or *g* for *w*. Hence we have in Modern English *catch* and *chase*, *launch* and *lance*, *card* and *chart*, *cattle* and *chattel(s)*, *warrant* and *guarantee*, *gaol* and *jail*, the last pair being not

strict doublets, but afford us an interesting example of a spelling variation that has survived in Modern English, and reflects the old difference of French dialectal origins. The alternation of *w* and *gu* may be illustrated also by our word *war*, which came from the Northern, and the French *guerre*, which came from the Central dialect. Sometimes, even, the new Central pronunciation affected a native English word. A good example is *ward*, which was paralleled in Middle English by the form *guard*, adapted from the Central French. Again, the doublets thus formed are not, in Modern English, synonyms. The extra dialect gave us new words, connected etymologically with the old, but having a separate and distinctive meaning or use.

Before we pass from French doublets, we may notice one other pair which do not, however, belong to this category. These are *ticket* and *etiquette*. Both originated in an old French form *estiquette*; the first, adopted in the sixteenth century, underwent a typical English change, and the second is the Modern French *étiquette* transplanted into English in the eighteenth century, with a different, specialised meaning.

## VII

It is unnecessary to treat in detail of words that are synonyms in the accepted sense. They abound in the modern language, and are, indeed, of its very texture. Two or three examples will suffice to illustrate those (often slight) differences of meaning and function which characterise all synonyms, and justify their existence. Thus the Saxon *begin* is the ordinary or colloquial, and the French *commence* the formal, word. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) illustrates it like this: 'The playbill tells us when the play will *commence*, though we ask each other when it *begins*'. He also points out that *begin* is the appropriate word before an infinitive—'begin (not *commence*) to see'. The difference between the Saxon *end* and the French *finish* is not quite so clear-cut; but here again syntax will help. In general, *end* is normally intransitive, *finish* more usually

transitive; in particular, *finish* is the word if the object expressed or understood, is a gerund: 'finish (reading) a book', 'finish (doing) a job'. But frequently the question of syntactical use does not arise—though it is often one to be reckoned with in the actual choice of a word to suit a particular context. If, for example, we have to choose between the native *unreadable* and the equivalent Latin *illegible*, our guiding principle is this: *unreadable* belongs to the realm of mental effort—a book is unreadable when it is deadly dull or difficult to understand; *illegible* means unable to be read by the physical eye; handwriting, a manuscript, a letter, may be illegible. It is interesting to practise the art of distinction with other similarly related pairs, like *break* and *fracture*, *work* and *labour*, *understand* and *comprehend*, *building* and *edifice*, *trust* and *faith*, *confidence* and *fidelity*, *shepherd* and *pastor*. There are, of course, thousands of them. To recognise exactly both what they have in common and what separates them in meaning and use is one (perhaps the greatest) of the secrets of all good speech and writing.

Even so, the examples in the preceding paragraph were chosen as being comparatively straightforward and simple. Often we have to choose, not between two, but among, perhaps, five or six. Moreover, the relationship of synonyms is affected also by the important factors which are discussed later in this chapter—change of meaning, association, figurative and idiomatic usages. Robert Louis Stevenson once complained, rather surprisingly, that words were rigid things, like blocks 'dear to the nursery', of arbitrary size and figure, and that it was out of these that the 'literary architect is condemned to design the palace of his art'. Commenting on this statement, Professor Walter Raleigh<sup>1</sup> said: 'Finite and quite rigid words are not, in any sense that holds good of bricks. They move and change, they wax and wane, they wither and burgeon; from age to age, from place to place, from mouth to mouth, they are never at a stay. They take on colour, intensity, and vivacity from the infection of neighbourhood; the same

<sup>1</sup> *Style*.

word is of several shapes and diverse imports in one and the same sentence; they depend on the building that they compose for the very chemistry of the stuff that composes them. The same epithet is used in the phrase "a fine day" and "fine irony", in "fair trade" and "a fair goddess". Were different symbols to be invented for those sundry meanings the art of literature would perish'. That is a fundamental truth of language, and especially of English. It leads us on to the consideration of our second principle—that, just as one meaning may be expressed by two or more words, so a word may have several meanings.

There are in this book many examples of words that have undergone a distinct, and sometimes remarkable, change of meaning—*lord* and *lady* (page 102), *deer*, *worm*, (page 48), *prevent* (page 67). In a living language that is a natural process. It simply means that words, like the people who use them, are the children of their own age. Thus in a primitive society the lord was literally the guardian and the lady the kneader of the bread; but as time went on that root, or literal, significance was lost because it no longer represented an actual condition of life. So *lord* became a general term for the master and *lady* for the mistress of the house. Afterwards, both became restricted in meaning, as mere appellations of title, but *lady* also retained, and still retains, a half-modified general sense, as a courteous or genteel synonym for the word which has become the real general term in Modern English, *woman*.

The change of meaning in *lord* and *lady* is clear only when we go back to their ultimate origins. We see the same kind of development in a few other Anglo-Saxon words. It is interesting, for example, to find that the word *book* is (probably) related to the word *beech*; a book was originally a kind of writing tablet made from the bark of the beech tree. Similarly *was*p—originally *wæps* (see page 119)—is derived from the same root as *weave* and *web*; the insect gets its name from the 'weaving' or 'web' of its nest. The modern word *fee*, 'money

paid for service', is even more instructive. It is the Anglo-Saxon *feoh*, which meant cattle or property in general—a meaning which survives in the legal term *fee-simple*, an estate that belongs to the owner and his heirs for ever. We have a parallel to this in Latin, where the word for cattle is *pecus*, and its derivative *pecunia* means 'money'.

The same kind of language process is illustrated in the doublets (see page 50) *cattle* and *chattels*, the second word reminding us of the equating of property in general with cattle, the primitive symbol of wealth.

Two of our numbers remind us that the fingers of our hands formed the basis of our counting in tens: *eleven* (Anglo-Saxon *endleofon*) means 'and one left' and *twelve* (Anglo-Saxon *twelf*) 'two left'. Here, too, we may note the development of the word *score*, which is one of our Scandinavian borrowings (Old Norse *skor*), and meant a mark scratched upon a surface such as wood or stone; the noun and, more often, the verb still keep this sense, which is synonymous with that of the Old Norse *rita*, the origin of our word *write*. The modern numerical meaning, 'twenty', developed from the custom of counting on the twenty fingers, and notching or 'scoring' the separate twenties on a stick or pole. We have a parallel in the word *tally*, which is derived ultimately from the Latin *taliare*, the French *tailler*, 'to cut'—a root which also gives us *tailor*. *Foot* recalls the fact that our body was the primitive measuring rod; so, more indirectly, does the archaic *ell*, the distance from the tip of the longest finger to the bend of the arm, the *elbow*. *Furlong* is 'furrow-long', the length of a normal furrow, and *acre* is the Saxon *acer*, a field, cognate with the Latin *ager*. We may notice also the older use of the word *span*—the distance between the little finger and the thumb of the outstretched hand—as a unit of measurement. Chaucer's nun had a forehead which 'was al most a spanne brood', and Goliath in the Bible story was 'six cubits and a span' in height. *Cubit* is the Latin equivalent of the Saxon *elbow*. The word is derived from Latin *cubare*, 'to lie down'; a cubit was the length of the fore-arm on which a man reclined. *Hand* survives only as a lineal measure for horses.

## IX

The same contrast between primitive and modern meanings is also exhibited in many of our Latin derivatives. With *book* we may compare *paper*, which came, through the French *papier*, from *papyrûs*, the name of a reed growing on the banks of the Nile. *Volume* has its origin in the Latin verb *volvo*, 'roll', from the scroll-like form of the ancient book. *Penna* ('a feather') gave us *pen*, a quill for writing. We may note in passing that the Modern French word for *pen* is *plume*. In the same way, *style*, from the Latin name ('stylus') for an iron pen, 'has come to distinguish the art that handles, with ever fresh vitality and wary alacrity, the fluid elements of speech'.<sup>1</sup> The word *digit*, from Latin *digitus*, 'a finger', reminds us, like the Saxon *eleven* and *twelve*, of the basis of our counting.

*Radius*, which has a doublet *ray*, originally meant the spoke of a wheel. Another mathematical borrowing, *focus* (which, though it retains its Latin plural, has become a common English word, and has even given birth to a verb) meant 'hearth' or 'fire-place', the central—or what we now might call the *focal*—point of the house. *Arena* is the Latin word for 'sand'—a reminder that sand was used to strew the floors of the ancient amphitheatres.

Such original or primitive meanings are implicit in many Latin derivatives. The root of *eliminate* is *limen*, a 'threshold' or 'doorstep'; so that *eliminate* means literally 'throw out of doors'. A *candidate* in an *examination* is literally 'a white-robed person being weighed in the balances', for *candidate* is derived from the Latin adjective *candidus* (white), and the Latin *examen* meant the 'tongue of a balance'. *Calculate* and the more technical term *calculus* have their origin in the diminutive form of the Latin *calx*, a stone—that is, they point back to the primitive method of counting by pebbles. We have, by the way, an opposite linguistic process illustrated in the word *bead*, which is the Saxon (*ge*)*bed*, 'prayer'. When paternosters and other prayers were 'told' (see page 63) by counting on

<sup>1</sup> Professor Raleigh, *Style*

'the small perforated balls forming the rosary' (*S.O.E.D.*) the word *bead* was applied to these balls, and hence entered the general vocabulary; it graduated, that is, from abstract to concrete significance.

So, at the root of the word *ostracise* is the Greek *ostrakon*, 'an earthen vessel or tile', from the custom of using tiles for the recording of the names of offenders in voting for their banishment. Another word of particular interest is *chancellor*, which came into English, through French, before the Conquest, in the time of Edward the Confessor. It is the Latin *cancelarius*, from *cancelli*, the grating or bars of lattice-work at which an official of, for example, a law-court sat or stood. The same word gives us *chancel* in a church, the part of the church behind the 'lattice' or screen. *Cancel* goes back to the Latin form; it means 'crossing-out' by means of a lattice of criss-cross strokes. The word *rival* is another good example. It is derived through French from Latin *rivalis* (from *rivus*, 'a stream') with the root meaning 'one living on the opposite bank of a stream from another' (*S.O.E.D.*). Its first meaning was 'colleague'. When Bernardo (*Hamlet*, i) says

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,  
The rivals of my watch,

he is referring to Horatio and Marcellus as his partners. But in Modern English the word has developed an almost opposite meaning, 'competitor'.

We see a similar process of change in some groups of derivatives from Latin roots. A couple of representative examples of this will suffice. The Latin *spiro* ('breathe') gives us the verbs (with their corresponding nouns) *aspire*, *expire*, *inspire*, *respire*, only one of which, *respire*, is now normally used in its literal sense. In older English the literal and metaphorical meanings existed side by side. Chaucer has

Whan Zephyrus eke with his tendre breeth  
*Inspired* hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes,



that is, 'breathed the breath of life into'. Addison speaks of an 'aspiration of wind'. *Expire* is sometimes used in medical language for the expelling of breath from the lungs; but in normal modern usage it is a synonym for the final losing of breath (= 'die'); and is, moreover, transferred to inanimate things in the sense 'come to an end'—thus a term, a lease, a time limit, expires. *Suspire* is now archaic; but Shakespeare has (*Hamlet*, i. 2):

The windy suspiration of forc'd breath.

*Transpire* has a sullied and somewhat peculiar history. It is a technical word in physiology and botany meaning 'to pass off as vapour through the pores'. Then metaphorically it came to mean 'leak out', a sense which belongs particularly to the eighteenth century, as we may gather from Johnson's definition 'to escape from secrecy to notice'. In nineteenth-century American usage it became a synonym for 'occur' or 'happen', and that is its colloquial meaning to-day. Fowler speaks of its 'notorious misuse' in Modern English, and gives an example of its correct use by way of encouragement: 'The conditions of the contract were not allowed to transpire'.

So the Latin *plicare*, 'to twist', 'to entangle', is represented in our words *imply*, *implication*, *implicit*, *explicit* ('unfolded', 'disentangled'), *complicated*, as well as those which come to us from the same root through the French—*complex*, *complexion* (see page 71), and *perplex*, which once had, but no longer retains, a literal sense—Addison, for example, speaks of 'perplexed thorns'. The secondary or metaphorical meaning (see page 80) of many such words had already developed in Latin itself, but these, and the corresponding Saxon examples, show how deep are the roots of language, and how clearly words themselves reflect the social development and progress of mankind. An etymological dictionary is a true historical romance.

x

But to turn from that change of meaning which is observable

only by a study of ultimate etymology to that which we can trace in the colloquial usage, and especially the literature, of the living language. We have already seen (page 48) how *deer*, *worm* and *tide* became restricted in meaning. To them we may add *fowl*, which once, as the Authorised Version of the Bible reminds us, had the general meaning 'bird'—'Behold the *fowls* of the air'. The Anglo-Saxon *wif* ('wife') is another example; in very early times it signified, as in Modern English, a 'married woman', but more often it had the general sense of 'woman', which survives in the modern compounds *housewife*, *midwife*, *fishwife*.

*Spinster*, too, is interesting. When Shakespeare wrote 'The spinsters and the knitters in the sun' he used the term literally, the 'spinning-women'<sup>1</sup>; the modern sense of *spinster*, 'unmarried woman', has become both twisted and restricted.

There is a parallel in the word *bachelor*, which is of uncertain derivation, but probably meant originally a farm labourer. From this it graduated into the language of chivalry, where it came to mean a novice in arms. Chaucer's squire was a 'lovere and a lusty bachelor'. So it came to mean a novice in learning, at a university; a bachelor was (and still is) one who has taken the first 'step' or degree. The general sense of youth and inexperience is reflected in the modern and common meaning of the word, 'an unmarried man'.

*Ghost* (Anglo-Saxon *gæst*) once had the wider meaning of 'spirit', the Latin derivative which, in general usage, has replaced it. The old phrase 'ghostly counsel' meant 'spiritual advice'; and in religious use to-day 'Holy *Spirit*' is often substituted for the 'Holy *Ghost*' of the Bible and the Prayer Book. Another religious word with a modern restricted meaning is *worship*—a disguised compound, the Anglo-Saxon *weorth-scipe*, 'worth-ship', that is, honour or worth. The Authorised Version has it: 'then shalt thou have *worship* in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee'. Nowadays the wider sense is seen only in the title for mayors and magistrates; the current sense is 'religious reverence' or 'adoration'. So, in the theological

<sup>1</sup> See also page 109.

vocabulary of to-day the word *atonement* ('at-one-ment') has lost the sense of reconciliation, and has come to mean 'expiation', the paying of a penalty for wrong-doing. • • •

In Modern English a 'narrowing' of meaning is illustrated in the words *commerce*, *traffic* and *business*, all of which once had a much wider significance. Commerce (Latin, *com* + *merx*, *mercis* 'merchandise') was an importation of the sixteenth century, and meant originally 'exchange of merchandise, especially on a large scale between different countries or districts'. It also had various figurative senses which it has since lost, as in Milton's (verbal) use:

And looks commercing with the skies.

*Traffic* in the sense of trade (Gonzalo's 'No kind of traffic will I admit'—*Tempest*, ii. i. 155) has become almost obsolete in Modern English, except, curiously enough, in a bad sense. We still talk of the 'drink traffic' and the 'drug traffic'. This downward tendency is illustrated also in the modern derogatory use of the adjective *commercial* and the verb *commercialise*. The current sense of *traffic*, in connexion with road and rail transport, dates only from the early nineteenth century. *Business* ('busy-ness') in its wider sense of 'general affairs' survives only in such colloquial phrases as 'Mind your own business' and 'go about your business'. Hamlet uses it with this meaning:

For every man hath business and desire,  
Such as it is.

## XI

Some Anglo-Saxon words were knocked sideways by the new Latin derivatives; they suffered not so much a restriction as a deterioration of meaning. Thus Chaucer's '*laewed* man' was a layman, as opposed to an ecclesiastic or churchman:

If that a preest be foul, in which we truste,  
No wonder if a lewed man sholde ruste.

but the modern adjective *lewd* means 'evil' or 'vicious'. *Lust* has had a similar history; it originally meant 'desire' in the good sense. The adjective *lusty*, originally 'eager', 'full of desire' has developed along somewhat different lines, and now has a physical sense, 'strong', 'healthy in body'. *Doom*, which once meant 'judgment' (we have it in *doomsday*), now suggests the dire results of judgment, and—one step further—calamity in general. *Naughty* and *knave* have suffered a deterioration. When the tribune in the opening scene of *Julius Caesar* called one of the citizens 'a naughty knave', he meant a good-for-nothing fellow, and when Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* said 'Soshines a good deed in a naughty world' she meant an evil, sinful world. *Naughty*, originally a very strong epithet ('of naught', 'worthless'), has been banished to the nursery. *Knave* once meant 'boy'— 'Gentle knave, goodnight', says Brutus to his little slave Lucius. Afterwards it came to mean first 'fellow' (a word borrowed, by the way, from the Scandinavian) or a servant, a meaning which survives in the knave of playing-cards, and finally a rascal. *Silly*, too, has had a downfall. Its earliest meaning was 'simple' or 'humble'—Cowper uses the phrase 'silly sheep'—and out of that developed the present sense 'feeble-minded'. We have in Modern English a similar twist in one of the secondary meanings of *natural* ('idiot'), and of *simple* itself.

## XII

Here we may conveniently introduce a group of words which have as a common basis their connexion with family and social relationships, and their reflexion of the changes that occur in such relationships during the centuries. We will begin with the word *human* itself.

The earliest spelling was *humane*. But Shakespeare has the spelling *human* (for modern *humane*) in the line (*Macbeth*, iii. 4):

Ere human statute purg'd the gentle weal.

The differentiation between *human* and *humane* was made early in the eighteenth century. Both words have the same derivation, Latin *humanus*, whose ultimate root is *homo*, 'man'. There is no difficulty in tracing the gradation of meaning: *human* signifies (in Malvolio's phrase) 'of mankind'; *humane* first 'characterised by such behaviour and disposition towards others as befits a man' (*S.O.E.D.*) and then, by a natural development, 'kind', 'benevolent'. *Humanity*, the corresponding noun, has both senses without any artificial distinction of spelling.

The word *kind* itself, both noun and adjective, is of the same root as *kin*, 'family relationship'. The noun still approximates to, but the adjective has moved away from, the original meaning. But the new adjectival sense was already current in Shakespeare's time, as we know from Hamlet's pun:

A little more than kin and less than kind.

A similar example is *gentle*, which derives, through French, from the Latin *gentilis*, 'of the same birth or race'. Its earliest meaning was 'of high, noble or (as we still say) *gentle* birth', a sense which survives in *gentleman*, originally applied to a man entitled to bear arms. Chaucer's 'parfit, gentle knight' was not gentle in our modern sense but 'of good family'. Shakespeare uses the word similarly, but as a verb, in *Henry V*:

He to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile  
This day shall gentle his condition:  
And gentlemen in England now abed  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here.

In the line quoted (page 60) from *Macbeth* 'gentle weal' means 'commonwealth', 'the general good of the people'. But in later English the meaning of both *gentle* and *gentleman* broadened. The manners appropriate to a man of high birth were assumed to be kindly and courteous, the opposite of rough and churlish. So *gentle* became a general epithet with

that significance, and *gentleman* could be applied to any man, of whatever birth, who exhibited the quality of gentleness. It must be confessed, however, that in later times the word has become associated with social and class distinction, and has lost something of its real and beautiful significance. Even so, the history of the word *gentle* is not quite finished; for in Modern English it has the restricted sense of 'soft', 'not harsh', and it is, in fact, more often applied to things and abstractions than to persons. We speak of 'a gentle reminder', 'gentle satire', 'a gentle reproof', and even a 'gentle slope', but rarely of a gentle man or woman. The original sense of *gentle* survives with a slightly sarcastic twist, in the doublet *genteel*.

There is a similar progress in the meaning of *courteous* and *churlish*. *Courteous* meant originally 'having the manners of the court', but quite early developed a general sense. Chaucer has it in his description of the squire:

Curteis he was, lowly and serviceable.

*Churl* (the Anglo-Saxon *ceorl*) meant a labouring man, a man of lowly origin. Both the noun and the adjective *churlish* have had a history roughly parallel to that of *gentle* and *gentleman*. The same kind of development is exemplified in the history of the word *clown*, which originally meant a rude, boorish person, and then—in Shakespeare, for example—was applied to the professional and court jester. It is this second meaning that has survived, though the older sense sometimes occurs in poetry, as in the familiar lines of Keats:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown.

### XIII

Two words of special interest are *cunning* and *craft*. The first is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *cunnan*, 'to know', and originally had a good sense, which survives in the Biblical phrase 'a cunning workman'. *Craft*, from a Scandinavian root

meaning 'strong', in early English meant 'art' or 'skill', and hence a trade carried off by skill, the sense we have in the modern *handicraft*. Both words are now associated, in normal usage, with deceit and guile. The same tendency is observable in the modern colloquial use of *knowing* in such expressions as 'a knowing child' and 'a knowing look'. It is a remarkable characteristic of the modern vocabulary that words associated with mental skill or superiority have often taken on a derogatory meaning: *clever*, which sometimes approximates to 'cunning', *intellectual* (as a noun), and the colloquial *high-brow* are interesting examples. Such usages go far towards proving that Englishmen have a strange distrust of the intellect and mental agility.

## XIV

Three or four other examples will suffice. *Fast* has undergone a somewhat violent change; it originally meant 'fixed' or 'firm', a sense we retain (adverbially) in 'stick fast' and 'fast asleep'. With our other modern use of *fast*, 'quickly', Weekley (*Etymological Dictionary*) compares a similar use of *hard* in the phrase 'run hard'. *Fast* suggests *speed*, a word which originally meant 'prosperity', as the somewhat archaic phrase 'wish you godspeed' reminds us. Milton uses the adjective, *speedy*, in this sense in *Paradise Lost*:

Whereto with speedy words th'Arch-fiend replied,

where *speedy* means 'betokening hope or success'. Another passage of Milton, from *L'Allegro*, reminds us of an older meaning of the word *tell*:

And every shepherd tells his tale  
Under the hawthorn in the dale.

*Tell* there means 'counts' and *tale* 'number': the shepherd is counting his sheep. We retain that sense in the phrases 'to tell the time', 'all told', and the Parliamentary 'teller'.

A puzzling Saxon word that often occurs in Shakespeare is

*owe*, which originally meant 'possess'. The line, from one of the sonnets,

And lose possession of that fair thou owest

means 'and lose the beauty that you have'. The word has undergone a peculiar reversal of sense, and (to add to our confusion) has been replaced by a similar word, *own*, which is derived from a later Saxon form of the original. *Wealth* is of the same root as *well*, and had the sense of 'well-being' or 'happiness,' which remains in the word *commonwealth*, and in the Prayer Book phrase 'in health and wealth long to live'.

# xv

The words already quoted, of whatever origin, illustrate changes of meaning that arose naturally through the changing conditions of life, and as a result of the fusion of the Saxon and the Latin elements. To these we may add a number of words of Latin and French derivation whose changes can best be illustrated in the literature of the past. One of the most important and familiar examples from the French is *charity*. It was once a word of deep and beautiful significance, adapted from the French *charité* through the Latin *caritas* ('dearness'), and approximating in meaning to the Saxon word *love*. In Saint Paul's great apostrophe ('Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels' (i Cor. 13)) the Revised Version of the Bible (1884) has *love* where the Authorised Version has *charity*. It is a pity, however, that *charity* has become debased and bedraggled in meaning, for in that passage and in the Prayer Book phrase 'that most excellent gift of charity' it has a sense that *love* (itself somewhat the worse for wear) cannot adequately express. Another example is *sentence*, derived through French from the Latin *sententia*, which originally meant 'opinion' or 'a statement of opinion'. We keep the meaning in the legal usage '*sentence* of a court' and in the adjective *sententious*. In Modern English the word is normally a technical term of grammar and language. *Rent*, up to the seventeenth century, had the sense of 'income', as it still has



in Modern French (*rente*). Chaucer writes, for example, of the poor widow in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*:

For litel was hir catel and hir rente  
and Shakespeare has the line

What are thy rents, what are thy comings-in?

Two passages in *Hamlet* illustrate the old meanings of the word *eager*, derived through the French *aigre* from the Latin *acer*, 'sharp' or 'sour' (two words which, by the way, may still be synonymous in Modern English):

It is a nipping and an eager air,  
where *eager* means 'sharp' or 'bitter'; and

Like eager droppings into milk,  
where it means 'sour'. In Modern English *eager* is roughly synonymous with keen, but it no longer shares its physical significance—'a *keen* knife', 'a *keen* wind'. Then there is the interesting word *puny*, derived through the French *puisne* from the Latin *postea natus*, 'born afterwards', that is, the youngest born. *Puisne* still exists as a legal term in Modern English with a meaning approximating to the original Latin: a *puisne* judge is 'an inferior or junior judge in the superior courts of common law' (*S.O.E.D.*). *Puny* is a popular spelling and has a popular meaning by association—the youngest born suggests 'weakly' or 'undersized', a sense that dates from the seventeenth century. The adjective *proper* has now lost, in normal usage, the sense which is uppermost in the French *propre*, '*one's own*'. We keep it in the grammatical term 'proper noun'—a name that belongs to, or, in a somewhat archaic phrase, is *proper* to one particular person or thing. But the usual modern meaning 'conventionally or morally correct' is more akin to the secondary French sense, 'clean'. With the first (archaic) meaning we associate the noun *property*, and with the second the noun *propriety*.

From the Latin word *dies* ('day') we derive the noun *diary*,

literally 'a day by day book', and the adjective *diurnal*, a learned and semi-technical term corresponding with the native English *daily*. But the French *jour*, which comes by a shifting of the stress from Latin *diurnalis*, has given us one or two words that have a somewhat adventurous history. *Journey* is by origin the distance travelled normally in a day, a sense which we half keep in the phrase, suggested by the Hebrew tradition, 'a Sabbath day's journey'. In Modern English, by the way, the word is associated with travel over land, whereas the word *voyage*, through French *viage* from Latin *viaticum*, is restricted to the sense 'journey by sea or air'. A *journal* is strictly a paper published daily, but in modern use it is invariably applied to 'periodicals', that is, magazines issued at definite 'periods'. *Journeyman* is a word that dates from the Middle Ages, arising out of the system of apprenticeship. It means 'one who having served his apprenticeship to a craft or trade is qualified to work at it for days' wages' (*S.O.E.D.*). The word, like *chapel*, 'an association of the journeymen in a printing office', is now most familiar in the vocabulary of printers. Another interesting word connected with journalism is *editor*. Its present sense did not develop until the eighteenth century, up to which time it was usual to speak, for example, of the 'Conductor' of *The Times*. *Editor* was the Latin word used in the Roman amphitheatre for the official in charge of the gladiators. The word came into French as *éditeur*, with the meaning 'publisher'. *Publisher* itself did not take on its modern meaning until after the eighteenth century; Boswell and Johnson always spoke of a 'bookseller'.

## XVI

Sometimes an opposite process takes place; the secondary meaning of a French word becomes the standard meaning in English, and the usual French meaning is adopted later. The stock example is *intrigue*, whose normal sense (as noun or verb) in English is 'plot' or 'scheme'. But the verb *intrigue* has, in quite recent times, taken the standard French meaning

'excite the curiosity and interest of' (*S.O.E.D.*)—'His recent pronouncement intrigues me', 'I am intrigued by his question'. Against this, Fowler—nodding for once—thunders in a column or so, declaring that we have the synonymous words *puzzle*, *perplex*, *fascinate*, *mystify*, *interest* and *pique* to choose from. But the simple fact remains that none of these are synonyms, witness the carefully worded definition of the *S.O.E.D.* quoted above; and, since we have no exact equivalent, *intrigue* with its French significance seems to be a useful, if not an entirely necessary, addition to our vocabulary.

## XVII

As for Latin derivatives, when they first came into the literary language they naturally had their original Latin sense, but many of them developed a secondary, which later became the normal 'English' meaning. Here are a few examples from the Prayer Book of King Edward the Sixth (1549) and the Authorised Version of the Bible (1611):

- (i) *Prevent* us in all our doings.  
(Prayer Book.)

(Latin *pre + venio*, 'come before', 'lead'); now in the sense of 'obstruct' or 'hinder'. We can see quite clearly the development of the modern sense in a passage from Shakespeare. When (*Twelfth Night*, iii. 1. 94) Viola exclaims, just as she is about to enter Olivia's house, 'I will answer you with gait and entrance. But we are prevented', she means that Olivia and Maria have 'come before', and by implication that they have hindered her from going in.

- (ii) . . . sitting in the midst of the *doctors*, both hearing them and asking them questions. (Authorised Version.)

(Latin *doceo*, 'teach'; hence a 'teacher' a sense which survives in the University title. The Revised Version (1884) margin has 'teachers' in this passage. In modern general usage *doctor* means 'one learned in medicine'. The noun *doctrine* preserves the Latin meaning.)

- (iii) . . . a *publican*, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom. (Authorised Version.)"

(Latin *publicanus*, through French *publicain*, an officer of the public revenue, a taxgatherer. The modern meaning, 'keeper of a public house', dates only from the eighteenth century.)

- (iv) For our *conversation* is in heaven. (Authorised Version.)

(Revised Version, *citizenship*. In the Authorised Version *conversation* also means 'behaviour' or 'disposition'.)

- (v) He closed the book, and gave it again to the *minister*. (Authorised Version.)

(Here the word is used in its original Latin sense 'attendant', 'servant'; the modern meaning, in the vocabulary of the Church and politics, has had an upward trend.)

- (vi) A prayer for all bishops and *curates*. (Prayer Book.)

(Originally one who has the 'cure', that is care—Latin *cura*—of souls in a parish; and therefore, as illustrated in the Prayer Book rubric, a general term. The modern meaning is restricted—'assistant to an incumbent'. With this word we may compare the far more interesting word *clerk*, which has had a number of ups and downs in the language. 'Clerk in Holy Orders' survives in the official vocabulary of the Church as a reminder that it is derived from the Latin *clericus*. It was, in fact, one of the few direct Latin borrowings of the Saxon period (A-S. *clerec* or *clere*). Even in the Middle Ages, however, the ecclesiastical significance tended to be lost, or subordinated to the wider sense 'scholar'. Chaucer's clerk 'hadde unto logic longe y-go', and his poor parson was 'also a lered man, a clerk'. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the doublet *cleric*, and the hybrid *clergyman* (see page 108), of parallel derivation through the French, had taken the place of the already ambiguous *clerk*. The sense 'secretarial and administrative officer

of a corporation or community' developed as early as the sixteenth century. We find the compound *town-clerk* in the Authorised Version (Acts, xix. 36). The modern sense is dated 1512 in *S.O.E.D.*

## XVIII

Shakespeare has, of course, many words with the original Latin meanings that were current in his time. Thus he often uses the word *vulgar* in its original sense, 'common', from the Latin *vulgus*, the common people as distinct from the patricians or aristocrats. We have it as a noun in *Julius Caesar*: 'and drive away the *vulgar* from the streets'. So English was often called 'the *vulgar* tongue', distinct, that is, from the French and Latin spoken and written by scholars during the Middle Ages. Our term '*vulgar* fractions', where *vulgar* means 'common' or 'ordinary', retains the old meaning. The word has had a downward trend, similar to, though not so pronounced as, that of the Saxon *lewd* (page 59). By contrast, *civil*, originally belonging to or associated with a citizen' (Latin *civis*) has broadened in meaning, with an upward trend. It now means, in normal use, 'polite' or 'well-mannered'. Shakespeare has 'civil doctor', in reference to Portia, and (of the honey bees) 'the civil citizens kneading up the honey'. The old sense is kept in 'Civil Service', 'civil law', and 'civil' (as opposed to military) life', though here the adjective *civilian* has tended to replace it in Modern English. *Pertinent* and its negative *impertinent* are interesting derivatives: the first retains its Latin sense (*pertineo*, to hold, to pertain) of 'relevant', 'bearing on the point', but *impertinent* has a peculiar twist of meaning in Modern English, and has become a synonym for the colloquial 'cheeky'. In Shakespeare it is, however, the true negative of *pertinent*:

Hear a little further,  
And then I'll bring thee to the present business,  
Which now's upon us; without the which this story  
Were most impertinent.

Milton, as might be expected, also affords many examples. Here are one or two from *Paradise Lost*. When he writes:

Let none *admire*  
That riches grow in Hell,

he is using the word in the original Latin sense, 'wonder'. In the phrase 'untam'd reluctance and revenge', the word *reluctance* ('strife, 'antagonism') preserves the meaning of the Latin *reluctari*, 'to struggle'; and in the two contrasted epithets 'bright and obscure', used of the angel essences, *obscure* clearly means 'dark' (the Latin sense), not 'difficult' or 'hidden', as in Modern English. He also, in a famous passage, uses the word *artist* in its older and broader sense, 'one skilled in any capacity, including invention and science':

whose orb  
Through optic glass the Tuscan *artist* views,

where the 'Tuscan artist' is the astronomer Galileo. This meaning was common in the eighteenth century: Johnson, for instance, uses the word in *Rasselas* for an inventor of a flying-machine. Indeed, the *S.O.E.D.* places the differentiating word *scientist* as late as 1840.

It will be convenient, though not entirely relevant, to note here that Milton himself gave us the word *sensuous*, 'connected with the senses or feelings'; he speaks of poetry as being 'more simple, *sensuous* and passionate'. He invented it, doubtless, because the existing word *sensuai* had already acquired its modern meaning, 'evil or lustful in feeling'; and the word has fulfilled a real need in English. In this connexion we may remember that *sensible* in Shakespeare and Milton is the equivalent of the modern *sensitive* ('not *sensible* of fire'), which was itself at first roughly synonymous with Milton's *sensuous*, and much later, in the early nineteenth century, came to mean 'physically or mentally impressionable'. The somewhat confused history of these four derivatives all (through French) from the Latin *sentio*, 'feel', makes an interesting and instructive parable of the vicissitudes of words.

## XIX

There is one group of words which exhibit change of meaning in a particularly interesting way. They are those terms adopted into the modern language from the vocabulary of medieval medicine. Of these *humour* is the most important. The 'humours' were the four fluids of the body—blood, phlegm, choler (or bile), and black choler—and then, by association, the dispositions of character or temperament which arose from them. In Chaucer and Elizabethan English the word is used only in these two senses. By *humorous* in the phrase 'the humorous duke', Shakespeare means 'moody', according to the variable humours of his body. The modern meaning, which is almost indefinable but suggests a mixture of fun, wit, and even pathos, dates from the end of the seventeenth century; it affords a good example of limitation or restriction of usage. Obviously, *sanguine* (from Latin *sanguis*, 'blood'), *phlegmatic*, *choleric* and *melancholy* (Greek, through French, *melas*, 'black') have had a somewhat similar history. So has *complexion*, which originally meant the temperament arising from the combination or 'complexion' of humours in the body. We may remind ourselves that in Modern English *heart* and *brain* are given an associated 'abstract' meaning, as were *liver* and *bowels* ('of compassion') in older usage. Two other familiar words belong to this group because of their connexion with that adjunct of medieval medicine, astrology. One is *influence*, which signified originally 'emanation from the stars' (*S.O.E.D.*), and has now a broadened meaning which quite forgets its origin. The Italian borrowing *influenza* is of the same derivation. The other word is *disaster*, adapted through French, from *dis-* and *astrum* 'a star', and meaning literally 'ill-starred'.

## XX

One example will suffice to show what melancholy changes befall a word when it becomes, as Shakespeare says, 'over-worn'. To-day the adjective *nice* is a maid-of-all-work, doing duty for a considerable number of other individual and

expressive epithets which we are too lazy or too indifferent to call into service. *Nice* weather, a *nice* book, a *nice* holiday, a *nice* girl, a *nice* frock—all these, and many more similar expressions, are eloquent witnesses to a modern poverty of speech that debases one word by over-use, and condemns others to comparative neglect. However, our bad treatment of *nice* is not as modern as we sometimes think. ‘And this is a very nice day’, says Henry Tilney in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1798), ‘and we are taking a very nice walk; and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! it is a very nice word indeed! it does for everything. Originally, perhaps, it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy, or refinement; people were nice in their dress, in their sentiments, or their choice. But now every commendation on every subject is comprised in that one word’. *Nice* has had, in fact, a curious history. It is derived from the Latin *nescius*, ‘not knowing’, ‘ignorant’, and had that sense in early English. Then it came (as Henry Tilney hinted) to mean ‘delicate’—a sense we preserve in the noun *nicety* and in such phrases as ‘a nice distinction’, ‘a nice problem’. Perhaps a glimmering of that sense remains when we exclaim, as we watch a game of football or cricket, ‘Nice work, sir!’, or ‘A nice shot!’; but even here the word is on its downward path.

A somewhat similar fate overtakes all words—especially those of strong or superlative significance—which become fashionable and are overworked for their pains. Thus in the eighteenth century the adjective *prodigious* was very common in both speech and writing, and from meaning ‘portentous’ or ‘miraculous’, it came to be for a time a mere synonym for ‘big’ or ‘massive’. *Vast* was another eighteenth-century favourite; Gilbert White in his *Journal*, for example, frequently makes the entry ‘vast rains’, and in novels and plays people are often ‘vastly amused’. But we can more than match these examples in modern times. Such words as *tremendous*, *horrible*, *terrific*, *enormous*, *awful*, *devastating*, have become the small change of ordinary conversation. It is, after all, a natural process in language, a colloquial variant of hyperbole, which has always had



a legitimate place in literature. No doubt the pace of modern life, the dire and quickening impulses of war, have been reflected in our vocabulary. Newspapers, too, have played their part, and have encouraged a hyperbolical use of words, now usually known as 'headlinese', in which any event, however trivial, becomes a crisis or a sensation, and every petty quarrel a war. The trouble is that such language defeats itself; the words become bedraggled puppets, so vulgarised (in the Latin sense) that they are no longer fit to perform their true function. Of these, and of many other offending usages, Sir Alan Herbert has some pertinent and amusing things to say in *What a Word!* But in vain. Not even he can control or check the vagaries of the living language.

## XXI

Association can be illustrated quite simply from the words that, in the first place, stand for the various parts of the body—*mouth, cheek, eye, tooth, head, arm, shoulder, lip*. Each of these has at least one associated meaning, and some of them more than one, arising from our recognition of the general likeness of the organ concerned to some other object in nature or art. Thus we speak of the mouth of a river and the mouth of a sack, the eye of a needle, the tooth of a comb or a gear-wheel, the head of a bed, or of a cabbage, the arm of a chair or of the sea, the shoulder of a hill. We go further than this, and use many of them in a figurative sense: the mouth of the people, meaning the expression, by vote or otherwise, of their desires, the eye of authority, the head of a business or of a school, the arm (that is, the department) of a service. *Cheek* has passed into the colloquial language as a synonym for effrontery or impertinence (see page 69); and *face, neck* and *nerve* are used in similar colloquialisms, 'to have the face, or neck or nerve to—'

An older word for face is *cheer* (Latin *cara*). *S.O.E.D.* quotes from Wyclif's translation of the Bible, 'To dreden the chere of them' (Jer. i. 17), where A.V. has 'Be not dismayed at their faces'. From its original sense of 'expression (of the face)', usually associated with happiness or pleasure, came the

abstract meaning 'mirth' or 'gaiety'; and, by another shift, 'hospitable reception and entertainment', a sense which is now 'archaic but is often found in Shakespeare, and in older poetry. *Shoulder* occurs in the phrase 'cold shoulder', where the adjective *cold* suggests reserve, and the metaphorical use of the noun derives from the idea of 'shouldering' people away. *Body* itself, as containing many members, gives us body of men, governing body, or, figuratively, body of opinion.

Sometimes, too, we have side by side with them an associated Latin term. Thus we use the word corporation (from Latin *corpus*, 'body') for a group of men who control a business or govern a town; and for an adjective corresponding with the noun *head* we have *capital* (from Latin *caput*, 'head'), as in capital city and capital punishment. We can find innumerable examples of such association in connexion with other common and familiar nouns. By association with the column in architecture, for example, we get newspaper column and column of soldiers. *Line*, by origin the word for a stretched cord, (an early Teutonic adaptation of the Latin *linea*, 'linen thread') has given rise to such various associated meanings as are represented in mathematical line, equatorial line, line of goods, railway line, and steamship line, with its interesting derivative for a vessel, *liner*. Bradley (*Making of English*) instances the word *pipe*, which is derived from a late Latin word meaning 'chirp', the *pipe* of birds. So in English it means, first, the instrument through which a chirping is made—the voice pipe, or an artificial musical pipe; then any kind of cylindrical tube—a gas pipe, a tobacco pipe, and, one step further, the actual tobacco smoked in a pipe. An interesting modern example is *gate*, which has come to mean the number of people who enter the gate at an athletic contest, and hence the money that is taken at the gate.

## XXII

Adjectives are even more susceptible to changes by association than nouns or verbs. Professor Raleigh gives two examples

in the passage quoted on page 53. He might have added our use of the word *fair* in 'the sense of 'average', 'not good and not bad', and the physical significance of the epithet *fine* in, for example, 'fine oatmeal', 'a fine rain'. Here are one or two other examples. *Old* may be an antonym of both *young* and *new*; and when Shakespeare writes, 'We shall have old swearing' he is using the word in a colloquial sense as we use it (though not precisely with the same meaning) in a phrase like 'old man' or 'a high old time'. *High* itself is in its normal use an antonym of *low*, but association gives us such usages as 'high tea', 'high jinks', 'high (i.e. tainted) game', and 'High Church'. We may note here the modern use in England of *right* and *left* as descriptive epithets for the two main political parties, borrowed from the Continental custom by which the conservatives sit on the right-hand and the extreme democrats on the left-hand of the President in the Council Chamber.

The corresponding Latin and French derivatives, Latin *sinister*, 'left', and *dexter*, 'right', and French *droit*, 'right', have an interesting history in English. Shakespeare uses *sinister* in its original sense: 'And this the cranny is, right and sinister' says Wall, in the lamentable comedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Another line, from *Henry V*, reminds us of the first step in the progress of the word to its modern meaning: 'Tis no sinister nor no awkward claim'. Here the sense is borrowed from the vocabulary of heraldry: the 'bend sinister' was the diagonal stroke from the right top of the shield to the left base, and signified illegitimate birth. It is not difficult to see how we have arrived at the modern meaning, 'dishonest' or 'malign'. Heraldic terminology also keeps the Latin *dexter*, but the ordinary language has only the adjective *dexterous*, the literal 'right-handed' having developed into the sense 'skilful' or 'agile'. Similarly, the French *droit* is represented in our adjective *adroit*, 'nimble' or 'clever'.

These examples are typical of hundreds of others. They illustrate the extraordinary pliability or elasticity of meaning in words. Sometimes association will bring about an apparent 'jump' in sense. One example will suffice. The verb *execute*

means 'do', 'put into effect'. It is therefore used normally in the phrase 'to execute the sentence of death upon a criminal'. But then, by a natural leap in usage, it came to mean the actual deed of judicial killing, and its object became the victim: 'execute—that is, carry into effect—the judge's sentence' developed into 'execute the criminal', and *execute* thus took on the associated meaning, 'kill'. In Shakespeare's 'Is execution done on Cawdor?' (*Macbeth*), we have a kind of midway use: 'Is execution (of the sentence) done on Cawdor?' The corresponding nouns *executioner* and *executor* (of a will) point the modern distinction.

## XXIII

We see this process of association actually at work in the language as we use it to-day. It arises partly from a happy knack we have in English of renovating old words, bringing them up to date, as it were, by modernising their former meaning. Most of them are associated with the mechanical inventions and developments of the industrial age. The word *engine* is characteristic. Up to the early nineteenth century it meant simply a contrivance, something made by 'ingenium', which is the Latin for 'skill'. In Gulliver's right fob (another word, by the way, which has dropped out with the change of fashions) the Lilliputians found 'a great silver chain, with a wonderful kind of engine at the bottom', which turned out, of course, to be his watch. But when steam power was developed, the term *engine* came to be restricted to the new *locomotive* ('mover from its place'); and in more modern times it is used also for the actual mechanical device which drives a vehicle or a machine. The original meaning survives in the compound *fire-engine*. A shortened form, *gin*, is common in Shakespeare; it meant 'a trap', or 'a snare'. *Machine* has had a somewhat similar development. It was not until the industrial age, towards the end of the eighteenth century, that it gained its normal modern meaning. Like *engine*, it originally meant any kind of artifice or contrivance—a sense which survives

when, for example, we use the word to-day for a bicycle ('He mounted his machine and rode away') and in the compound *bathing-machine*. Shakespeare reminds us that up to the seventeenth century it could be used for the human body. Thus Hamlet ends his letter to Ophelia: 'Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him'.

With *engine* we associate *railway*, a word which dates from 1756. It was used originally for the wooden rails that were laid down in coal-mines for the easy conveyance of goods in wagons; and had a new lease of life during the 1830's when the steam-engine came on the scene. Once established, the new railway took over from the road the words *carriage* and *coach*, and from the canals (once called 'navigations') the term *navigator*—a man at work on canal construction—which in railway usage soon became contracted to *navvy*. *Station*, to which the *S.O.E.D.* assigns over twenty different meanings, general, astronomical, naval, ecclesiastical, was adopted by the railway in 1830, and by the police force in 1856. The somewhat odd term *sleeper*, originally (seventeenth century), a strong piece of timber used as a support in building, found its way into railway terminology as early as 1789. An interesting modern example is *tube*, which, by that kind of visual association noted earlier in this chapter, was popularly used for the Central London (Underground) Railway, opened in 1900; and has since developed a more general sense.

The modern developments in roads and road traffic, too, have occasioned the renovation of some old words. Thus the term *dicky*, used originally of the back seat in a coach (rather like *rumble*, which is used by Dickens was re-adopted in 1912 for the back seat of a motor-car, just as *pillion* (1503) once the extra saddle behind the rider of a horse, re-appeared in 1920 for the extra seat behind the rider of a motor-cycle. On the road themselves we have borrowed from the circus the suggestive *roundabout*, from the gas-bracket the equally apt *by-pass* (1922), and from the military vocabulary *park* or *parking-place*. The term *robot* for automatic traffic lights is dealt with elsewhere (page 198).

The word *car* is interesting. It is one of the very few words (see page 18) that we derive from the Celtic, and meant simply 'a wheeled vehicle'. But until quite late—indeed, up to the time of the machine age—it was generally used in a figurative sense, as in the famous lines of Gray:

But see where Dryden's less presumptuous car  
Wide o'er the fields of glory bear  
Two coursers of ethereal race.

In modern usage *car* belongs to the road (*tram-car*, *motor-car*) and *coach* and *carriage* have deserted the road for the railway—a good example of the queer ways of vocabulary. *Car*, however, belongs to the railway vocabulary of America, a fact of which we are reminded by our 'Pullman, sleeping, restaurant *car*'.

#### XXIV

Certain other familiar terms in the realms of modern science and invention are not so much actual revivals as adaptations of existing (some of them native) roots. With the conquest of the air by dirigible machines a new group of words was added to the popular vocabulary. *Balloon*, of course, is long established (1634); it is an anglicisation of the Italian *ballone*, a big ball. *Airship* appeared in 1888, compounded directly of the existing nouns *air* and *ship*, on the model of the German *luftschiffe*. It is noteworthy that we have a similar direct compounding in *aircraft* (1907), but in *aeroplane*, *aeronaut* and *aerodrome* the first element is the Greek prefix *aero-*. There was an attempt at one time to popularise the form *airplane*, on the model of *airship*. The word is included in the *S.O.E.D.* and dated 1907, but it has never established itself, though the Committee on Broadcast English strongly recommends it. *Airway* is a true revival; it was originally used for a ventilating shaft in a mine, and only in comparatively recent times came to mean the route of a service of aeroplanes.

In connexion with wireless, the revival *broadcast* is mentioned

below. We may note also that the actual term *wireless* is a pure native compound, and has almost ousted, in common language, the Greek *radio-telegraphy* and even its more manageable shortening *radio*. Another wireless term that is entirely English is *loudspeaker*, where we might have expected a Greek formation on the model of *telephone*. *Aerial* is the adaptation, as a noun, of an existing adjective; the original phrase (1902) was 'aerial wire'.

Among the abstract terms of recent scientific research the most familiar is *relativity*, which was first used in a general sense, 'the relationship of one thing to another', and was adopted (1919) by Professor Einstein as the word to express his theory that all motion in the universe is relative. It has already taken its place in the vocabulary, though few people understand its real meaning. With it may be compared the much older *gravity* and *gravitation*, which were parallel adaptations as scientific terms to express the particular meaning of the famous theory propounded by Sir Isaac Newton. To these we may add one or two words which have become popular in the new science of psychology, and have taken on a specialised sense, like *complex*, *repression*, *reaction*. In another realm, the political, we have *conservative*, *liberal*, *labour*, *socialist*, *communist* and such up-to-date terms as *nationalisation* and (*de*)*rationalisation*, all of which are old friends with new faces.

Outside the realm of transport, perhaps the two most interesting modern revivals are *broadcast* and *blackout*. *Broadcast* was first used on the farm, of casting seed far and wide; then, with the invention of mechanical sowers, it fell into disuse; and finally was taken (1922) into the language of wireless. *Blackout* is, perhaps, a happy coinage (1938) for 'the total extinction or concealment of lights' (*Chambers*) as a precaution against air attack in war; but it already existed as a technical term in the theatre for the total darkening of the stage to produce dramatic 'effect'. It had other senses, too, during the world war. The airman might suffer from a blackout, or for purposes of security there might be a blackout

of the news. An even more modern example is the use of the word *evacuation*. It was originally a medical term—the ‘emptying (Latin, *vacuo*) of the stomach and bowels’; but it had already established itself in military vocabulary with an associated sense, ‘the withdrawing of troops from a town or fort’. The recent war, with its mass movements of civilians from places open to hostile attack, gave it a much wider significance, and from it there has developed the word *evacuee*, for a person so evacuated. With *evacuate*, *billet* also has graduated from the military into the civil vocabulary; its normal meaning is one that itself arises by association, for *billet* is the French word for ticket—the order served upon a householder, directing him to give lodging to a soldier or (1939) an ‘evacuee’.

Topical association, as we know from experience, often gives a new ‘twist’ to the meaning of words. Thus *siren*, *alert*, *shelter* and *warden* can never have, at least for the present and immediately succeeding generation, quite the same significance as they had before 1939. Whether their present particularised meanings will be recorded in the dictionaries of the future we cannot say yet; but at least they stand a chance of surviving (as archaisms, we trust) in such literature as may pass down from this age to posterity.

## XXV

Above all, meaning is influenced by figurative language, and especially *metaphor*. It will be useful at the outset to state exactly what the term ‘metaphor’ means. Here, then, is the definition of the *C.O.D.*: ‘Application of name or descriptive term to an object to which it is not literally applicable’. Briefly, therefore, ‘metaphorical’ is the opposite of ‘literal’ as applied to meaning. Thus, in the New Testament parable, a certain man is given ten *talents* of silver—that is, ten pieces of silver of a certain weight. But in the modern language the sense has been ‘transferred’ (the Greek meaning of the term) to mental or intellectual wealth. We speak of a man with *talent*, or, using the verb we have made out of the noun, a *talented* man. Such



transference of meaning is so common as to be an integral and essential part of the language. It is present when we call a politician 'a *pillar* of the State', a camel 'the *ship* of the desert', an outstanding person in any community 'a *shining light*', an enthusiast 'a *live wire*'; and when we speak of the *door* of opportunity, the *road* to ruin, the *ladder* of success, the *wages* of sin. Metaphorically, we *eat* our words, *prune* our sentences, *steer* our way through difficulties, have a *fiery* temper, cast a *cold* glance, make a *two-edged* remark, indulge in *flowery* language, tell a *tall* story, make *elastic* regulations. In this connexion, it is interesting to notice how adjectives of colour have metaphorical significance: a *blue* funk, a *brown* study, a *gray* prospect, *red* (in politics—'communist'), and *green*, as in Shakespeare's

my salad days,  
When I was green in judgment.

We have a particularly interesting instance of the metaphorical use of *black* in the word *blackmail*. *Mail* was an old word of Scandinavian derivation meaning 'speech' or 'agreement', and hence, by somewhat remote association, 'payment' or 'tax'. The epithet *Black* was used in the sense 'illegal', as in our modern 'black market'. Scott (*Rob Roy*, Chapter XXVI) gives us its origin, among the Scottish Highlanders:

'He became a levier of blackmail, wider and farther than ever it was raised in our day, a' through the Lennox and Menteith, and up to the gates o' Stirling Castle.'

'Blackmail?—I do not understand the phrase', I remarked.

'Why, if ony heritor or farmer wad pay him four pounds Scots out of each hundred pounds of valued rent, whilk was doubtless a moderate consideration, Rob engaged to keep them scaithless—let them send to him if they lost sae muckle as a single cloot by thieving, and Rob engaged to get them again, or pay the value.'

The generalised modern sense did not develop until the middle

of the nineteenth century. *Blackleg* seems to be of unknown or uncertain derivation. *S.O.E.D.* gives its original meaning (1771) as a turf swindler or a sharper, and dates the modern meaning 1865.

All these metaphorical usages arise quite naturally. The literal meaning of the word is, by a mental image, associated with other objects or abstractions. A metaphor is, in effect, a compressed simile. In literature, and especially in poetry, metaphors are deliberate and often sustained. These do not concern us here, as they do not directly affect language; they merely remind us that a creative writer can take almost any word and endow it with imagery—that is, with metaphorical meaning. But such uses as are illustrated in the phrases quoted above are established by the custom of ordinary speech and writing; they are part of the common stock of our vocabulary.

Here we must note a very important process or development in the metaphorical use of words. In the examples given, the metaphors are, in varying degrees, still 'alive'; that is, the image which suggested them is recognisable. But there are hundreds of words in English in which the metaphor, though originally present, has become so obscured that we are no longer aware of it, or only faintly aware. The Latin derivatives quoted on page 55 are clear illustrations of this fact; unless we know their origin, *eliminate* and *examination*, for example, have no metaphorical significance at all; and, indeed, they have none in English. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) uses the very word *examine* in an interesting note on the graduation from 'live' to 'dead' metaphor:

The men were *sifting* meal (literal).

'Satan hath desired to have you, that he may *sift* you as wheat' ('live' metaphor).

*sift* the evidence (three-quarters 'dead').

*examine* the evidence ('dead').

So, in the phrases, 'branch of a railway', 'branch of a Bank', 'room for improvement', 'the root of the trouble', 'to face the

situation', 'to have no *scruples*', 'a *dry* book', '*shallow* opinions', the metaphorical sense is now more dead than alive. However, if the metaphor is now so moribund as to be negligible, we still have an associated meaning (page 73) which increases our means of expression by enriching an individual word. Thus, even if *branch* in 'the branch of a Bank' does not suggest the picture of a tree, we are aware that it has a meaning other than the literal one, and use it accordingly.

But the metaphors that are most alive are those enshrined in idioms—those phrases whose literal meaning has, by customary use, been 'transferred', or become metaphorical, in the colloquial vocabulary. It is impossible to treat of this subject here in any great detail. The reader is referred to the second part of Chapter V in Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith's *Words and Idioms*, a treasure-house of those vivid, often homely, phrases which are of the very texture of our figurative speech and writing. In this book Mr. Pearsall Smith gives a list of some five hundred idioms which are suggested by the human body alone. Here are half a dozen examples: 'to be head over ears (in love)', 'to put someone's nose out of joint', 'to rub shoulders with', 'skin-deep', 'to wear one's heart on one's sleeve', 'from hand to mouth'. And here are a few representative idioms from other sources: 'on the wrong tack' (nautical), 'to draw someone's fire' (military), 'to throw off the scent' (hunting), 'to leave at the post' (racing), 'out of the blue' (weather lore), 'to sow one's wild oats' (agriculture), 'to play gooseberry' (gardening), 'to have a finger in every pie' (cooking), 'to turn up trumps' (cards), 'to keep one's end up' (cricket). Trevelyan (*English Social History*), commenting on the importance of cloth-making in the Middle Ages, instances the following metaphorical words and phrases which it has left us as a heritage: 'thread of discourse', 'spin a yarn', 'unravel a mystery', 'web of life', 'fine-drawn', 'home spun', 'tease'.

Sometimes a single word that belongs originally, or mainly, to the vocabulary of a particular sport establishes itself in the

literary language. We have an example in *bias*, though that word, of doubtful etymology, had a brief history as an adjective meaning 'oblique' before it was appropriated as a noun to the language of bowls. Shakespeare often uses it figuratively, no doubt because bowls was the fashionable game of his time. In his phrase 'my fortune runs against the bias', and, less obviously, in Polonius's

And thus do we of wisdom and of reach  
With windlasses, and with assays of bias,  
By indirections find directions out,

we see the word in its progress from literal to metaphorical use. Another term from bowls, *rub* (an impediment on the green) has a limited metaphorical use, mainly in the phrase from Hamlet's soliloquy:

To sleep, perchance to dream: Ay, there's the rub.

The word has also entered the vocabulary of golf.

*Point-blank* derives from archery, the second half of the word being the French *blanc* 'white'—the 'blank' was the white centre of the target. Shakespeare uses it in this literal sense, though not in connexion with the bow and arrow:

As level as the cannon to his blank  
Transports his poison'd shot.

The figurative sense of the compound developed as early as the second half of the seventeenth century, and is most often used adverbially.

*Goal* has its origin in athletic, that is running, contests, though (curiously enough) it has now migrated to the game of football, *post* or *winning-post* having replaced it in the vocabulary of racing, whether of men or of horses. It is usually explained as an adaptation of the French *gaule*, a pole or stick, though the *Oxford Dictionary* casts some doubt on this etymology, and suggests a possible origin in an hypothetical Saxon word *gal*, meaning a boundary or a barrier. At

any rate, it originally had a literal sense, and, of course, still has in the language of sport. The Revised Version (Philippians, iii. 13) has it in one of the familiar images of Saint Paul, which illustrates sufficiently the development of the figurative meaning: 'Forgetting' the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling'. Here the Authorised Version has *mark* for *goal*.

The term *ace*, from the vocabulary of cards and dice, has lately been adopted in the slang of the Royal Air Force, where *ace* means 'a crack airman' (*Chambers*, 1943). This usage seems likely to establish itself, probably with extended senses, in the common language. Billiards gives us *fluke* (1857), of unknown etymology, a term which quickly took its place in the colloquial vocabulary as a metaphorical word, and may now be said to have established itself in the language.

Like words themselves, idioms may die out in the process of time. Thus Shakespeare has many that are not easily intelligible to us now because the circumstances of their origin no longer exist. To take but one example: when Bottom leaves Quince's house with his fellow 'mechanicals', he cries, referring to their promise to meet the next night in a wood near Athens, 'Hold, or cut bowstrings'—'Keep your promise or drop out of the play'. That is an idiom derived from archery; an archer who had cut his bowstrings could take no further part in the sport. With the almost complete disappearance of archery as a pastime the idiom has been lost. There are, however, many which survive from the past and are in constant use, but whose origin is forgotten. For example, we often use the expression 'flash in the pan', though rarely with any conscious sense of its literal meaning—the sudden flash which spent itself before it could ignite the powder in the pan of an ancient flint-lock firearm. The reason is obvious: the priming pan and flint no longer exist. But the idiom, though divorced from its origin, is still alive, unlike some which go the way of ordinary metaphors (page 82) and become dead. Thus 'up-to-date' is now so much a part of the literal language that we

are not conscious of its origin in the counting-house—‘entered up to date’, ‘at fault’, ‘at a loss’, ‘to cast about’, no longer suggest their connexion with hunting terms referring to the loss of scent; and the modern slang expression ‘fed up’ seems remote from what Mr. Pearsall Smith says is its probable source—the ‘feeding’ of an agricultural machine. Of those quoted from Trevelyan (page 83) all betray their origin except *tease*, which except perhaps to those in the trade scarcely suggests the process of combing wool or scratching cloth.

## XXVII

It is obvious that old idioms (like ‘flash in the pan’, above), which have no significance in modern life, are often kept alive and handed down in literature. Thus phrases like ‘a thorn in the flesh’, ‘heap coals of fire on the head’, ‘a drop in the bucket’, ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, even if we owe them in their present form to the translators of the Authorised Version, are, in fact, characteristic products of the language. Others, which have arisen out of the subject-matter of the Bible, are, of course, a gift of the translators. Such are ‘corn in Egypt’, ‘the writing on the wall’, ‘a ewe lamb’, ‘the old Adam’, ‘in a far country’, ‘the fatted calf’, ‘a good Samaritan’, ‘among the prophets’. It is important to remember that in their Biblical context these phrases are literal; they have only since acquired an idiomatic meaning, just as *talent* (see page 80) has become metaphorical. No doubt, too, many of the idiomatic phrases and metaphors which we find in Shakespeare were in fact part of the general idiomatic or proverbial language of the day, as Mr. Bernard Shaw has reminded us in *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*<sup>1</sup>. They were merely crystallised for all time by his genius: ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’, ‘hoist with his own petard’, ‘a tide in the affairs of men’, ‘caviare to the general’, ‘a local habitation and a name’, and scores of others.

<sup>1</sup> See also *No Bed for Bacon* by C. Brahms and S. J. Simon (Penguin).

## XXVIII

One or two other figures of speech have their repercussions on language. Thus by *metonymy*, the 'substitution of an attributive or other suggestive word for the thing meant' (Fowler, *M.E.U.*), the word *Crown* may stand for *King*, *cup* or *glass* for the drink it contains, and *woolsack* for the Chancellor who sits on it. This figure, by the way, is now very popular in semi-official and journalistic English, where Downing Street, for example, stands for the English and Washington for the American Government—'We are anxious to hear what Downing Street (or Washington) will have to say'. Similar to metonymy is *synecdoche*, 'the mention of a part where the whole is to be understood' (Fowler). Thus a farmer sells twenty *head* (of sheep or pigs), and a manufacturer employs a hundred *hands*. Both metonymy and synecdoche are, in fact, particular forms of 'association' (page 73). We have other examples in such an expression as 'There was perfect sympathy between *pulpit* and *pew*, where *pulpit* stands for the clergy and *pew* for the congregation or members of a church. Similarly the word *bench* is used as a generic term for magistrates and justices; *bar* for the counsel (itself a metonymous usage) who plead at it, and hence are called *barristers*; and *cabinet* for the room in which the ministers of the Crown meet. An even better example is *press* for the personnel connected with a printing establishment, or for the—especially journalistic—literature which is printed by the machine. In this connexion we may note the technical term *newsprint* for the actual paper on which a newspaper or magazine is printed.

But a figure which has had a more potent influence on the meaning and use of words is *euphemism*, which simply means the calling of an ugly thing by a pretty name, as when the Greeks, to placate the Furies, called them 'Eumenides', the pleasant ones. But the idea of placation has little, if any, place in modern euphemism, which usually arises out of a fear of indelicacy or of such blunt speech as may shock or

hurt another. Many words, in the name of delicacy or decorousness, have been almost banished from common speech, though in modern times they are frequent enough in realistic novels. We owe this type of euphemism mainly to the extreme prudery of the Victorian age, in which a leg was often referred to as a 'limb' and trousers as 'unmentionables'. Even now *stomach* usually takes the place of the good Saxon word *belly*, and *closet* (which in the Bible and Shakespeare means simply 'a private room') becomes in ordinary language *lavatory*, literally (Latin, *lavo*) 'a washing-place'. The other type—avoidance of bluntness or the unpleasant—is represented in the use of *pass away* for *die*, *expectorate* for *spit*, *perspire* for *sweat*, and the French borrowing *abattoir* for *slaughter-house*. Mr. H. G. Wells has an amusing short story (*The Truth about Pyecraft*) which turns upon the euphemism 'reducing weight' for 'getting rid of fat'. Some of these Fowler includes in a list of what he calls 'genteelisms', on which he is inclined to be severe, though he admits that they may be used in appropriate contexts. But he argues absurdly when he calls *chiroprapist* a 'genteelism' for *corn-cutter*. *Chiroprapist* is the normal English word for a 'foot surgeon', and a corn-cutter, if it is anything, is an agricultural machine. The truth is that euphemism is a reflexion of the conventions in social life, and as such a factor to be reckoned with in our vocabulary. The purist can no more exclude it than he can exclude any other usage that has been established by the custom of language.

## XXIX

In general, we may say that, since language reflects life, the meaning of words is perpetually changing with the progress of life itself. Of this fact the words quoted in this chapter are but representative examples. When we look back across, say, three or four centuries, we can perceive the change quite clearly; but over a shorter period—our own lifetime, for example—the change may be imperceptible; just as we can perceive the movement of the hands of a watch at intervals



of five minutes but not at intervals of a few seconds. Nevertheless, change is always there—at any rate, in those words that are part of the living (i.e. the spoken) language, and not archaisms surviving only in literature. Most often it is slow and gradual; but sometimes it may be quick and sudden, especially (as we have seen) under the stress of unusual or momentous events, like war.

Above all, there is the great power of what has been called in this chapter 'association'. Sometimes, indeed, association affects our private language, as distinct from the language in general. Thus a word used between friend and friend may have a secret meaning of its own, unknown to anyone else, because it is associated with some particular event or element in their friendship. In the ordinary language, it often arises from visual association—the eye makes, as it were, an unconscious simile or likeness, and translates it into words. Let us end (where perhaps we should have begun) with a homely parable. The unfortunate batsman goes in and is bowled first ball. Against his name in the score-book stands the figure 0. But 0 is, in shape, rather like an egg, and an egg may be associated with a duck. So we say (or used to say) that he 'made a duck's egg', which according to our usual custom of economising in sounds, we have shortened into 'he made a duck'. That is a simple example of a process that is fundamental to language. Our thoughts jump, as it were; and our words jump with them, to land sometimes in the queerest places. In that fact we have the secret of change of meaning, which has been illustrated in this chapter; the secret of the romance that lies in every word we read or speak.

## SHORTENING AND COMBINING

## I

Most of us are conscious of a tendency in our speech to 'slur' words, to behead or curtail them, or to clip off a final consonant. That tendency has been strong all through the history of English. We shall see later, in Chapter V, how it accounts, at any rate in part, for the loss of inflexion in our grammatical forms; and a glance at the extracts from Anglo-Saxon and Mediaeval English already quoted will show us that the words are, on the whole, longer than the corresponding ones in Modern English. Thus *-e* which usually had a grammatical significance, was always sounded in Saxon and sometimes in Middle English, whereas to-day, even if it survives in spelling, it is always mute.<sup>1</sup> To put it briefly, words, like coins, get worn down in use. Thus the Anglo-Saxon *cyning* quite early became *cyng* ('king'), and *feowertiene*, a word of six syllables, is now reduced to two, *fourteen*. We see the same process in the pronunciation of such proper names as *Gloucester* and *Leicester*. Unaccented syllables are sometimes lost, in pronunciation if not in spelling, like the first *i* of *medicine* and the first *e* of *interest*. Consonants that belong to unstressed syllables are apt to be weakened or lost altogether, like the *h* of *forehead* and the *w* of *toward* (see pp. 116, 117).

Some of these losses and weakenings are of special interest. Thus the indefinite article (*a*) is a weakening of the Anglo-Saxon numeral *an* ('one'). Chaucer has the form *o*:

He moot as wel seye o word as another,

<sup>1</sup> Except in direct borrowings from the Greek, like *syncope* and *epitome*.

and uses *a* in the sense of 'one':

He moot reharce, as ny as ever he can,  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge.

So our personal pronoun *I* is a weakened form of the Anglo-Saxon *ic*. Similarly, Saxon adjectives and adverbs which ended in *-lic*, *-lice* now end in *-ly* (see also page 179). The old endings *-ig* and *-ige* are reduced to *-y*; for example, the Saxon *bysig*, *blafdice* became the Modern English *busy*, *lady*. We have, too, in some words a weakened form of the particle *ge-*, which, as we have already seen, was attached to many words in Anglo-Saxon. It was represented by *y-* in Middle English, and survives in such poetical archaisms as *yclept* ('called'). In Modern English it has a disguised form in the first syllable of *among*, *aware*, *enough*, *alike*, and in the *i* of *handiwork*, the Anglo-Saxon *handgeweorc*. The pronoun *it*, like *he* and *him*, once had an initial *h*, but lost it about the end of the Middle Ages. Malory (1470) uses both forms in one sentence:

They espyed this blak barget, and had merveyllle what it it mente. Thenne the kynge called sire Kay and shewed hit hym. •

These are representative examples out of the past. But this process has always gone on in speech, and is still going on to-day. It is, indeed, one of the greatest factors in the gradual change of the language from Saxon times onwards, and it accounts, in part at least, for that discrepancy between pronunciation and spelling which is discussed in Chapter IV.

## II

Shortening sometimes takes the form of the clipping off of whole syllables at the beginning or the end of words—a process called technically *aphaeresis*. Thus the word *sport* is our modern clipped version of the French *disport*, which survives somewhat fitfully as a reflexive verb, 'disport yourself upon the green'. Chaucer has it as a noun: •

For certainly she was of gret disport.

Other words which lose their initial *dis-* or *de-* are *stain*, which is derived from the Old French *disteindre*, 'to take the dye out of', and *spite* from the Old French *despit*.

Consider then we come but in despite,

says Peter Quince in his ill-punctuated Prologue to 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. *Despite* survives to-day rather oddly as a preposition—'Despite the bad weather we decided to go'. Other examples of this initial shortening are *mend* for *amend*, *cheat* for *escheat*, *cute* for *acute*, *sample* for *example*, *story* for *history*. Here, of course, both forms still exist, to provide us with useful doublets.

Sometimes a long and cumbersome word becomes shortened; thus *drawing-room* represents the older *withdrawing-room*. But an even better example of this kind of shortening is the compound *battleship*, which represents the older phrase 'line-of-battle ship'. It is surprising that this 'great word' (as Logan Pearsall Smith calls it in *Words and Idioms*) did not enter the language until 1884—too late for inclusion in the *Oxford Dictionary*. Modern examples are *bus*, which soon became the popular form of *omnibus* (Latin 'for all'), and has now established itself as the accepted form, *phone*; both noun and verb, for *telephone*; and *cello* for the Italian borrowing *violoncello*. *Cycle* is now the popular word for *bicycle* as a verb, but this contraction for the noun has given way to the ugly but expressive *bike*. We see this process of shortening at work in our treatment of such compounds as *motor-car* and *motor-coach*, which are nearly always *car* and *coach* in ordinary speech. A very interesting example of colloquial shortening is *soccer* for *association* (football)—that is, the game played under the rules of the Football Association. The word has, of course, been corrupted in both spelling and pronunciation.

Very often the first syllable of a Latin word had already disappeared, owing to differences in accentuation, in French itself. Thus the Latin *avunculus* became the French *oncle*,

which is the English *uncle*. Sometimes clipped and unclipped forms remain together in English as doublets with more or less differentiated meaning. Many Latin words beginning with 's' had *es-* in Old French (Modern French *é*), and this was represented by an initial *e* in English. In this way we get, for example, the words *estate*, *esquire*, *espy*, *espouse*, *especial*(ly), all of which have corresponding aphetic, or shortened, forms in Modern English—*state*, *squire*, *spy*, *spouse*, *special*(ly).

Less obvious examples of beheading are *fender* and *fence* for *defender* and *defence*. Both words contain the idea of protection—a fender protects the fireplace and a fence protects a garden or a plot of land. *Size* for *assize* is even more surprising. The size of an article is that which is fixed by the statutory decree of *assize*, that is, the 'sitting' (French *asseoir*) of a legal court. In Modern English the meaning is, of course, generalised.

### III

Curtailling words (technically called apocope) is perhaps more common than beheading them. *Chap*, for example, is a shortening, dating from 1577, of the word *chapman*, a buyer, a customer, from the Anglo-Saxon *ceap*, a bargain (which we have in *Eastcheap* and *Cheapside*). Chaucer's Shipman used to steal 'many a draught of wine 'whyl that the chapman sleep'. *Chapman* survives only as a proper name. Rather oddly, the original synonym 'customer' is still synonymous colloquially with the abbreviated word; 'He is a funny chap' and 'He is a funny customer' mean much the same thing in Modern English. We may compare with this the colloquial *gent* for *gentleman*. The somewhat un-English word *curio* is short for *curiosity*; and *cab* is the abbreviated form of *cabriolet*, a French derivative which was thus shortened within four years of its introduction into English. Similarly, *taximeter-cab* became first (1907) *taxi-cab* and in modern speech *taxi*. Again we notice a similar tendency in modern speech. We speak of going by rail rather than by railway; and *chara* is already a common curtailment of *charabanc*. Other examples of modern shortening

are *cinema* for *cinematograph*, *photo* for *photograph*, *mike* for *microphone* or *micrometer*, and *piano* for *pianoforte*.

We have a peculiar habit of curtailing the names of garments. The word *togs* is an old-established example. *S.O.E.D.* dates it 1809 in its modern sense, and derives it tentatively from *togeman* or *togman*, a vagabonds' cant word for a coat, ultimately from the Latin *toga*. So the delightful word *spatter-dashes* for 'a kind of long gaiter or legging of leather, cloth, etc., to keep the trousers or stockings from being spattered, especially in riding—1687' (*S.O.E.D.*) became contracted, both as a word and as a garment, into *spats* (1802). We have similar curtailments in the colloquial *combs* for *combinations*, *knickers* for *knickerbockers*, *undies* for *underclothes*, and *mack* for *mackintosh*.

Some of these shortened words are already admitted into the dictionary as standard formations; others still belong to colloquialism and slang. But they all reveal a tendency that is common in speech, and that has a vital effect on the language generally. Many, indeed, that await formal recognition to-day may be the recognised forms of to-morrow, for one of the results of the speeding up of life is the speeding up of language by the popular use of such contractions. The process began in earnest in the eighteenth century. Swift noted the beginnings of what seemed to him a deplorable fashion, and commented on it with characteristic satire. He speaks of 'some abbreviations exquisitely refined—as *poz* for *positive*; *mob* for *mobile*; *phizz* for *physiognomy*; *rep* for *reputation*; *plenipo* for *plenipotentiary*; *incog* for *incognito*; *hypps* or *hippo* for *hypochondriacs*; *bam* for *bamboozle*; and *bamboozle* for *God knows what*; whereby much time is saved, and the high road to conversation cut short by many a mile'. Some of these are now defunct, but in their place have come hundreds of others, like *vac* for *vacation*, *prep* for *preparatory*, *rep* for *repertory*, *mag* for *magneto*, *gym* for *gymnasium*, which would, doubtless, have filled Swift with surprise and indignation.

#### IV

Sometimes, however, the opposite process has taken effect—

that is to say, a word has to-day a longer form than it had in older English. *Advantage* is an interesting example. It was originally the French *avantage*, which was quite early, by false etymology, given the Latin suffix *ad-* (*advantage*). This word, however, existed side by side with an aphetic form of *avantage*—*vantage*—as when Portia says (*Merchant of Venice*):

And be your vantage to exclaim on us.

*Vantage* survives only in certain phrases, notably 'point of vantage', and as a technical term in the game of tennis, where it is usually further shortened as *van* ('van out, in'). So in Shakespeare we have the word *file* for *defile*:

For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind.

*File* itself is a mutated (see page 152) form ultimately connected with the adjective *foul*. From it we have the noun *filthy*.

Somewhat analogous to such shortenings is the modern custom of forming 'words' out of initial letters. Swift himself affords us an example in the so-called 'little language' which he used in writing to Stella—MD for 'my dears', Pdfr for 'poor dear foolish rogue', FW for 'foolish wenches' or 'farewell'. Typical examples in Modern English are L.S.D. for money (Latin *librae, solidi, denarii*), M.P., M.A., etc., for designations and degrees, as when we say 'He is M.P. for Westminster', or 'He is an M.A. of London'; B.B.C. for British Broadcasting Corporation; and A.V. for Authorised Version (of the Bible). There are, of course, thousands of others in specialised use, as, for example, the contraction *S.O.E.D.* used throughout this book for *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. With these may be compared, though they are not strictly examples of 'initial language', AI (for 'excellent'), the official designation of a first-class ship in Lloyd's Register; the useful contraction TNT for the name of the explosive *trinitrotoluene*; and the slang expression 'on the q.t.' for 'on the quiet'.

During the recent war we formed a habit of talking in

alphabetical language. Most organisations, and the officials connected with them, were known to us by the initial letters of the words that made up their title—like A.R.P. for Air Raid Precautions, and N.F.S. for National Fire Service. But we often went one step further, and whenever possible made an actual ‘acrostic’ word out of the initials. Not that this is altogether a new thing in English. We have the example of *cabal* in the reign of Charles II. This, of course, already existed, meaning ‘a secret society’, but it was especially applied (about 1673) to five of his ministers—Clifford, Arlington, Buckingham, Ashley and Lauderdale—the initials of whose names happened to make up the word. A good modern example of the adoption of an existing word as an acrostic formation is *basic*, in the sense ‘Basic’ English, where it means ‘British (and) American Scientific International Commercial (English)’. The War of 1914–18 gave us *wren* for a member of the Women’s Royal Naval (Service), *waac* for a member of the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, and *Dora* for the Defence of the Realm Act. All these, and some others, are included—as words—in many modern dictionaries. Since the last war (1914–18) many more have arisen, some before and others during the recent war (1939–45), including *waaf*,<sup>1</sup> *raf*,<sup>2</sup> *unrra*,<sup>3</sup> *ensa*,<sup>4</sup> *cema*,<sup>5</sup> *naafi*,<sup>6</sup> *octu*,<sup>7</sup> and *uno*.<sup>8</sup> It remains to be seen whether or not they will establish themselves in the language, or at any rate achieve a place in the dictionary, if only as museum pieces.

## VI

We may limit, alter or modify the meaning of a simple or ‘root’ word in two ways: by adding to it either another complete word, so forming a compound, or an affix—that is, a

<sup>1</sup> Women’s Auxiliary Air Force.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Air Force.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Relief (and) Rehabilitation Administration.

<sup>4</sup> Entertainments National Service Association.

<sup>5</sup> Council (for the) Encouragement (of) Music (and the) Arts.

<sup>6</sup> Navy, Army (and) Air Force Institutes.

<sup>7</sup> Officer Cadet Training Unit.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Organisation.



particle, not a complete word, that stands before (*prefix*) or after (*suffix*) the root form. As we have already seen (page 13), compounds were very common in Anglo-Saxon, and though many of its picturesque formations have been replaced by Latin synonyms, compounding of words of whatever origin has always been and still is an important element in English, as it is in German. Here are a dozen representative examples: *housewife*, *workman*, *bookcase*, *woodcraft*, *grandfather*, *overcoat*, *newspaper*, *railway*, *weekday*, *nosegay*, *churchyard*, *lovingkindness*. In all of these a noun is given particular significance by the addition of another noun, an adjective, an adverb, or a participle. *Lovingkindness*, an invention of Coverdale (1535) in his translation of the Bible, is on the pattern of such Anglo-Saxon formations as *mildheortnes*; so is *woodcraft*, which, however, did not appear until late Middle English, then disappeared, and was revived again by Scott.

In a few of the compounds given above a French derivative stands alongside a Saxon word—*grandfather*, *bookcase*, *overcoat*; in one, *newspaper*, two nouns of French derivation stand together; the others are entirely Saxon. The compounding of words of different origin is dealt with later (page 108), under hybrids.

All these may be called 'true' compounds in that the two elements are welded together and spelt as one word. But we have beside them a whole host of noun formations in which the fusion is not so complete. Our capacity for making such words is almost unlimited. *Water-jug*, *apple-tree*, *paper-knife*, *waste-paper-basket*, *lamp-shade*, are typical examples. With them we may notice those useful and concise formations by which we contract a verbal phrase into a single word: 'a bath *for swimming*' becomes a *swimming-bath*, 'a stick *for walking*' a *walking-stick*, 'a desk *for writing*' a *writing-desk*. Here the first element is a gerund<sup>1</sup> used adjectivally; such compounds are to be distinguished from those in which it is a present participle, like *singing-bird* and *humming-top*. There are also many compounds of noun and past participle, such as

<sup>1</sup> See page 167.

*water-logged, tree-lined, rain-washed*. Inventions of this type are especially characteristic of the poets—‘the *star-dogged* moon’ ‘*deep-browed* Homer’, ‘*heavy-lidded* sleep’. Indeed, it may be said that in both prose and poetry our power of making hyphenated compounds is one of the most fruitful elements in the development of vocabulary.

An obvious question arises, however, and one that is difficult to answer. When do the two, or more, elements coalesce in one word? When do we use hyphens? When do two associated words remain as separate entities? To take a simple example—the word for the principal master in a school is indifferently written *headmaster*, *head-master* and *head master*, and no one of these forms can be ruled out, though the *Oxford Dictionary*, by the way, does not recognise *headmaster*. The problem, indeed, is almost impossible of solution. All that can be said is that certain fusions have established themselves; others have general but await official acceptance; and some, not yet fused, hover uneasily between hyphen and no hyphen. Thus although *lovingkindness* is spelt in modern editions of the Authorised Version as one word, the *S.O.E.D.* gives only the form *loving-kindness*; many people write *armchair*, but the *S.O.E.D.* admits only the spelling with the hyphen. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) says, ‘The chaos prevailing among writers or printers or both regarding the use of hyphens is discreditable to English education’, and follows up this dictum with eleven columns of learned and entertaining disquisition on the subject, to which the interested reader is referred. One example of the peculiar difficulties that arise may be given. Fowler insists on *court martial* as two words, though he allows the hyphen in the possessive form *court-martial’s*. The *S.O.E.D.* follows his ruling, but blandly prints *court-martial* in a subsidiary note under the same heading. *Chambers* wisely has *court-martial*; for the fact that the first element inflects for the plural (*courts-martial*) does not affect the argument.

It is not possible to do more than give a few miscellaneous examples of hyphenated and other compounds which are really part of the rich idiom of our language. Here are a few:

*roundabout, merry-go-round, happy-go-lucky, stony-broke, ne'er-do-well, down-and-out, die-hard, fly-by-night, reach-me-down*, and such 'echoic' formations as *see-saw, knick-knack, sing-song* and *hotch-potch*. Some of these are of recent origin, and some, like *down-and-out* (without hyphens in the *S.O.E.D.*), we have taken from American. Professor Weekley (*Something about Words*) refers to the American contribution of the last twenty or thirty years as 'the most vivifying influence that colloquial English has ever undergone'. The modern American language has, in fact, something of the gusto, the love of words for their own sake, which English had in Elizabethan times. To it we owe, for example, the now familiar compounds associated with the cinematograph, like *eye-wash, fade-out, close-up* and *sob-stuff*. In more modern times we have *haywire*, a metaphorical term from agricultural life. When the wires binding bundles of hay were cut, they became coiled and twisted; hence 'going haywire' means 'becoming mentally excited and confused'. *Wash-out* is also of American origin; it referred literally to the damage caused by floods to roads and railways. With the recent war the American influence became even stronger, and many picturesque compounds like *browned-off, block-buster, speak-easy*, await, or have recently gained admittance to the dictionary. To these must be added the many idiomatic American phrases which now enrich (or, as some think, spoil) our language.

• VII

In Chaucer the compounding of prepositions, articles, negatives and pronouns with other words was very common. Thus in the Prologue we have the following forms: *atte* ('at the'), *everichon* ('every one'), *anon* ('on an', that is, in or into one'), *namore* ('no more'), *thilke* ('the ilk', that is, 'the same'), *nolde* ('ne wolde', would not), *noon* ('ne oon', no one), *noot* ('ne wot', know not), *nathless* ('ne the less', with which we may compare our modern *nevertheless*). Modern English is more sparing of such compounds. We have none with the articles, except *another* and the colloquial *t'other*. Chaucer's *atte*

survives only in the double *t* of proper names, like *Attwood* ('at the wood'). Combinations with a negative are far more common, like *nothing*, *nobody*, *nowhere*. *Everyone* is an indefinite pronoun, and is distinct in Modern English from *every one*. In Chaucer's line:

So hadde he spoken with hem everichoon,

*every one* (two words) would be the modern English equivalent. *Anon* remains only as a colloquialism or an archaism.

In older texts, too, we often find compounds with the verb *to be*—*shalbe*, *wilbe*, *maybe*—of which only *maybe* survives. We have one verb compounded with a negative, *cannot*, doubtless because of the juxtaposition of the two *n*'s. Some words are often illegally married. *Alright* is the most familiar of them; for though we have *almost*, *although*, *altogether*, *always*, *all* and *right* still remain, even with their adverbial sense, in single blessedness. Another example is *forever*, which is good American, but bad English; *for* and *ever* still dwell apart, though there seems no just impediment to their union. The argument that *forever* cannot be justified any more than *forgood* or *forworse*, advanced by Wilfred Whitten in *Is it Good English?* is surely not valid. *Forever*, like *cannot*, is a natural compound, whereas the other two are not. Besides, *ever* is already a common element in compounds, witness *whatever*, *however*, *whoever*. Calverley thought it worth while to write an ironic poem on the subject, two or three of whose stanzas are quoted here:

Forever! 'Tis a single word!  
Our rude forefathers deemed it two.  
Can you imagine so absurd  
A view?

Forever! passion-fraught, it throws  
O'er the dim page a gloom, a glamour:  
It's sweet, it's strange; and I suppose  
It's grammar.

Forever! 'Tis a single word!  
 And yet our fathers deemed it two:  
 Nor am I confident they erred;  
 Are you?

It is remarkable that while we have *into* and *unto*, *on to* are still normally separate words, though there is a tendency nowadays to combine them in purely prepositional use: 'I stepped onto the chair' but 'We went on to the next stop', where *on* is a real and separate adverb. Probably this logical process will prevail; *onto* is, in fact, recognised as an alternative form by the *S.O.E.D.*, which gives an example from Keats. A more modern attempt at compounding which has aroused the ire of the pedants is *nearby*, sometimes as an adverb but more often as an adjective ('a nearby school'). The *Oxford Dictionaries* do not admit it, but *Chambers* (1943) records the hyphenated form *near-by*. There seems to be little real objection, however, to the compound. Probably custom will prevail in the end, especially as the synonym *neighbouring* does not exactly express the meaning of *nearby*.

A few odd forms have arisen in Modern English as a result of false compounding through the liaison of two words by careless pronunciation. Thus the Anglo-Saxon 'a næddre' has developed into Modern English 'an adder', and 'a naperon', from the French *naperon*, is the modern 'an apron'. *Napkin*, which is of the same French origin, has suffered no such initial change. An example of the opposite process is 'a newt', which was the Saxon 'an efte'—the original word still survives as *effet* in Kent and some other districts. So is *nickname*, which is a corruption of the Saxon 'an eke' (i.e. 'also') *name*. *Orange* lost an *n* in Old French before the word was taken into English; its original Arabic form was *naranj*. Certain proper names exemplify the same effect. *Nash* and *Noakes* developed from the phrases 'at than ash' and 'at than oak', where *than* was an old inflected form of the definite article. *Riding*, the term for a division of Yorkshire, is derived from *thriding*, 'a third part' (for the position of *r* see page 119); 'west, east,

north thridding' became 'west, east, north Riding' by a natural blurring and re-arrangement of the *t* or *th* sound. We may note in this connexion the popular re-arrangement of Whitsun Day as Whit Sunday, and the vulgar pronunciation of 'this morning' as 'the smorning'.

Some words that were originally compounds have gone the whole hog and become one in a real sense—that is, their separate parts are no longer obvious or even recognisable in spelling or pronunciation. We have here, in effect, a particular example of shortening. Of these the stock, and the best, representatives are *lord* and *lady*. The primitive form of *lord* was *blaf-weard*, the 'loaf-ward'. Already in Anglo-Saxon this had developed, by the vocalisation of *w*, into *blaford*, and finally the loss of initial *b* and the elimination of *f* between vowels gave the modern *lord*. *Lady* was *blaf-dige*, 'loaf-kneader', the second element *-dige* being of the same root as *dough*. The compound underwent the same changes as *lord*, the final *-ige* weakening (see page 91) into modern *-y*. We have similar examples in our monosyllables *as* and *not*, *as* from the Saxon *eall-swa* and *not* from *ne awiht*, 'not aught'. Of these, however, intermediate forms exist; *eall-swa* gives us *also* and *ne awiht* gives us *nought*, *naught*, the two pairs providing doublets, with differentiated meaning. The Saxon negative was *na*, Middle English *ne*, which, as we have already seen, was often compounded with the verb; but *not* has established itself as the modern adverb of negation, and *no* has become a negative adjective.

### VIII

More obvious examples of this organic fusion are *woman*, *husband*, *nostril*, *holiday*, *petticoat*, *daisy*, *dismal*, *goodbye* and *answer*. *Woman* was originally *wif-man* ('wife-man'); the medial *f* was too weak to survive, and in the singular the initial *w* has affected the sound of the vowel, as it does in *won't* for *will not*, though in the plural, spelt *wymmen* in Malory and other old texts, the original sound somewhat inexplicably returns. In *husband* we have the two words *hus*

('house') and *bonda*, a Scandinavian word meaning a peasant freeholder. Here we may note also the word *housewife*, which in certain meanings is pronounced and sometimes spelt *bussif*, a form which has itself weakened into *bussy*, with a deterioration of meaning. *Nostril* is a combination of *nose* and *thirl*, an old word meaning a hole, or opening. Chaucer says of the Miller that 'his nose-thirles were blake and wyde'. The strange behaviour of the *r* in this and in other words is dealt with on page 119. *Holiday*, originally *holy day*, has changed its meaning, or at any rate its significance, with its form. It is an odd commentary on modern progress that what was once associated with the Saints Days of the Church is now associated with the Bank. Similarly *petticoat* was *petty coat* (two words), *petty* being our English form of the French *petit*. *Daisy* is the modern representative of the Saxon phrase *dæges eage*, 'Day's eye'; *dismal* is the Latin *dies malis*, 'the day of evil'; and *goodbye* is 'God be with you'. *Gospel* is a compound of *god* ('God' or 'good') and *spell*, 'story', a word which survives only in the realms of fairyland and magic. A parallel formation is *gossip*, from *God* and the old word *sibb*, meaning a relation; so the word originally meant 'a relation in God', that is, a godparent. The modern meaning points, perhaps, to the conversation that would naturally take place at a christening. Shakespeare seems to use the word in the general sense, 'an old woman':

And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl,  
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.

In *gossip* we see the effect of assimilation, which is also clear in the modern pronunciation, though not the spelling, of the compounds *cupboard* and *blackguard*. With these we may compare the sailor's pronunciation of some nautical compounds, like *bo'sun* for *boatswain*, *cox'un* for *coxswain* and *fo'c'sle* for *forecastle*, which, however, keep their landlubber's spelling. *Answer* has a delightful, if somewhat disreputable, origin; it is made up of the adverb *ond*, 'back' ('and'—see page 183) and the verb *swerian*; so that it means literally

'swear back again'. To these, which are mainly of Saxon origin, we may add the interesting word *jeopardy*. It is made up of the two French words *jeu parti* 'even game', and hence, by association, 'uncertain chance'. From that the modern sense of 'peril' or 'danger' developed quite early. We have it in the Authorised Version: 'Why stand we in jeopardy every hour?'

*Answer* is a disguised example of a type of compound which is of great importance in our vocabulary. We have in English a vast number of verbs which are actually compounded with, or whose basic meaning is modified by, adverb particles. In true compounds the adverb always preceded the verb, as in *upset*, *overlook*, *overtake*, *undertake*, *understand*, *overcome*, *overdo*, *offset*, *withstand*. In some of these, like *understand*, the adverb so affects the meaning of the simple verb as to obscure it altogether. But even more common is what Mr. Pearsall Smith (*Words and Idioms*) calls the 'phrasal verb', in which a following adverb is separate from but in close association with the verb itself. Thus from the simple intransitive verb *look* we have the phrasal verbs 'look out', 'look up', 'look in', 'look into', 'look over'; from *get* we have 'get in', 'get up', 'get off'; and from *give* 'give in', 'give up', 'give over', 'give off'. In one or two semi-archaic survivals the following particle is actually fused with the verb. The chief are *don* ('do on') and *doff* ('do off'). Shakespeare uses the form *dout* ('do out'—put out, extinguish). It is important, however, to recognise one or two interesting distinctions. First of all, it is clear that our vocabulary is enriched by the fact that the real compound usually differs in meaning from the corresponding phrasal verb; thus, *overtake*, *upset*, *offset*, *overlook*, have by no means the same sense as 'take over', 'set up', 'set off', 'look over'.<sup>1</sup> Second, the phrasal verb is not associated, as Mr. Pearsall Smith wrongly says, with a preposition but with an adverb. Thus there is no phrasal verb corresponding with the true compound *understand*. In

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, however, uses the real compound *overlook* in the sense 'look over', as in Hamlet's letter to Horatio: 'Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this, give these fellows some means to the king'. The sense survives, too, in the derivative noun *overlooker*.



the sentence 'I stand under a tree' the verb is simple, and *under* is a preposition governing *tree*. So in 'I look up the street' we have a simple intransitive verb followed by a prepositional phrase, whereas in 'I will look up the reference' we have a transitive phrasal verb. Not that this distinction is always so clear and simple as that. In the sentence 'He will get off lightly' the verb is obviously phrasal, but there is some doubt about it in the sentence 'I saw him get off his bicycle'. Is *off* a preposition and *get* a simple intransitive verb with a modified meaning, or is *get off* phrasal and transitive? Whatever the answer may be, it is clear that these verb-adverb compounds or associations give to the language a peculiar gusto and idiomatic flexibility.

There are certain nouns formed after the pattern of these phrasal verbs, though often the corresponding verbs do not themselves exist. Among actual compounds we have for instance *income*, which is an old formation, though Shakespeare has

What are thy rents, what are thy comings-in?

*S.O.E.D.* gives the verb *income*, before the sixteenth century, as the equivalent of 'come in' in its literal sense of 'enter'. The analogous *outcome*, though it existed before in Modern English, was made popular in its present sense by Carlyle. *Outlay*, *outlook* and *outfit* are other examples, the corresponding verbs being 'lay out (a sum of money)' 'look out' and 'fit out (with clothes)'. *Uplift*, now generally used in a faintly satirical sense, is both noun and verb. So is the modern *black-out* (see page 79). *Line* gives us *outline*, *line-out* (in Rugby football) and *line-up*, often used in modern journalism for the disposition of nations or political parties. Bradley (*Making of English*, 1924) notes *upkeep* as a journalistic importation from the Scottish dialect, 'in which this mode of composition has been more generally used than in standard English', and he notes *uptake* from the same source. To these may be added *intake*, which has had various meanings in the past, but to-day is most commonly used in the technical language of the motorist—the

*intake* of the carburetter. It is interesting to note that the phrasal verb is an important element in the structure of the modern 'Basic' English.

## IX

But even more important than compounding is the building up of words by the addition of prefixes and suffixes to a stem. For it is in this way that word 'families' come into being, and it is roughly true to say that unless a word multiplies, as it were, it holds a precarious place in language; that is, it stands a good chance of dying out. It is unnecessary, and indeed impossible, to illustrate this fundamental process of language in detail. Any page of the dictionary will provide examples. One will suffice here. If we take the Latin word *scribo* ('write'), we find that it has a number of relatives or descendants in English: *scribe* itself, now slightly archaic; the verbs *describe*, *subscribe*, *inscribe*, *circumscribe*, *escribe*, all of which are built up with Latin prefixes; the corresponding nouns, formed from another stem of the Latin verb, *description*, *subscription*, *inscription*, the adjective *descriptive* and the corresponding adverb *descriptively*; and the verb *scribble*. We must remember, of course, that these, and many formations like them, existed already in Latin; whole families were, that is, adopted into English. It is an interesting and profitable task to take a page of ordinary prose and, with the aid of a dictionary, make similar groups of relatives, showing, for example, how by the addition of prefixes and suffixes different parts of speech may be made from one root word. This exercise will prove how closely Latin is woven into the texture of our language.

A few prefixes and suffixes of Anglo-Saxon origin are of special interest. Some, like the prefix *for-* are no longer 'live', that is, they cannot be used to make new formations. *For-* was a kind of intensive negative with the sense 'against', 'away from'. The commonest verbs in which it survives are *forget*, *forswear*, *forsake*, *forgo*, *forlorn*. In *forsake* the stem *sake* originally meant 'contend'; so that *forsake* means 'contend against', 'repudiate'. *Forgo*, 'go without', is often confused,

even by good writers, with *forego*, 'go before', the Saxon *fore-* corresponding with the Latin *pre-*. *Forlorn* means 'altogether lost', the stem being the old past participle (*loren*) of the verb *lose*.

Anglo-Saxon was particularly rich in suffixes added to noun, adjective and verb stems to indicate 'state'. The most important were *-ness*, *-hood* ('-hood') *-th*, *-scape* and *-dom*. Corresponding Latin and French suffixes were respectively *-ation* and *-té* (English *-ty*). The suffix *-scape* ('-ship') is of the same origin as *shape*. In *landscape* and the parallel but later *seascape* it is derived from a cognate Dutch form, a term in painting, which had an older spelling *-skip*, retained in Milton:

Whilst the landskip round it measures.

In one or two words the *-th* suffix has been weakened to *-t*; the two most important are *sleight* and *height*. Here again, however, Milton retains the old spelling:

into what pit thou seest  
From what heighth fall'n.

Several other words, like *weight*, have an original suffix *-t*, which is not a corruption or weakening of *-th*.

A particularly interesting Saxon suffix was *-stre*, which was added to verb or noun stems to make feminine agent nouns. An outstanding survival is *spinster*, originally 'a female spinner' (see page 58). Its modern meaning 'an unmarried woman' has developed by an association of ideas: the spinster continued her occupation because she had no husband to fend for her. We have another survival in the proper name *Baxter*, which represents the Anglo-Saxon *bæcestre*, a baker—feminine because the baking of bread was then the province of women. For the same reason *seamestre* was the Saxon word for a tailor. On the other hand, *webbestre* (our proper name *Webster*) had a masculine form *webbe*, 'weaver', as we know from Chaucer:

An Haberdassher and a Carpenter,  
A Webbe, a Dyere, and a Tapicer.

In more modern formations, like *malster*, *trickster*, *teamster*, the suffix loses its feminine significance—an interesting reflection in language of the changing place of women in the community. Indeed, some of the older feminines, like *seamster*, have been remodelled by the addition of the French suffix *-ess* (*seamstress* or *sempstress*). To-day, when women are admitted to almost any profession and to most types of labour, the language has been hard put to it to devise new differentiated forms for sex. However, the general tendency is to make the masculine form common, as *doctor*, *novelist*, *dentist*; and *chairman*, in Modern English, is often used of a woman. Even words like *poetess* and *authoress*, which have been long established, are dropping out of fashion, though *actress* still holds its own. *Conductress*, recorded in *Chambers* (1943), is a modern formation that gained currency in the war of 1914-18, and has since re-established itself in the stress of another war.

We have already seen (page 97) that in making compounds we often yoke together words of different origin. Similarly a French or Latin affix may be added, for example, to a Saxon stem, and a Saxon affix to a Latin or French stem. In *joyful* and *beautiful* the mixture is French stem plus Saxon suffix; in *disbelieve* it is Latin prefix plus Saxon stem; in *sympathiser* it is Greek prefix, stem and suffix plus Saxon suffix. Such combinations are called technically 'hybrids'. They can be made at will so long as the prefixes and suffixes concerned are 'live', like the Saxon *-er* and *-ness* and the Latin *de-* and *dis-*. But some are 'dead', that is to say they existed at one period in combination with a stem of the same origin, and survive in such combinations, but cannot make new ones with stems of different origin. A good example is the Saxon *for-*, noted above. We could not add that to a Latin stem and make, for instance, a verb *forscribe*, meaning, say, 'write against'. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) instances the words *coastal* and *tidal*, in which a dead Latin suffix *-al* (*-alis*) has been added to an English stem. Actually the word *coast* is of Latin origin (*costa*, a rib), but Fowler argues that if the combination is to be properly made the suffix should be added to the real Latin, not the anglicised,

stem, and the word should be *costal*. *Speedometer* is another word on Fowler's black-list because a typical classical connecting vowel *o* links together an English word and an Anglicised suffix (see page 133). But though 'speedmeter' is undoubtedly the correct formation, *speedometer* is the more satisfying and euphonious word; so, hybrid or no hybrid, it has achieved its place in the dictionary. Certainly, as Fowler admits in his article on *tidal*, such hybrids, once established, are not easy to dispense with. There are many of them in English, especially among technical and scientific terms, and they arise because convenience or analogy tends to defy the ordinary rules of word-making. As always, the custom of language prevails; the purist can do no more than lay on it a restraining hand.

## CHAPTER

### SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

Thou zed! thou unnecessary letter!—*King Lear*

#### I

It is a common idea that English spelling is difficult, inconsistent and absurd. The accusation, since it is usually based on isolated irregularities, particularly the little family of 'gh' words (like *rough* and *through*), is exaggerated. But the fact remains that in English there is no regularised correspondence between the sound of a word in standard speech and its expression in written symbols. And this for two main reasons. First, our alphabet (that is, our stock of symbols) is deficient in certain letters and contains others that are not necessary. The result is that one letter, or symbol, may represent more than one sound, and one sound may be represented by more than one symbol. And second, our modern fixed spelling system (which dates only from the eighteenth century) is based on the history—the original formation—of words rather than on their actual sound in present speech; or, to put it another way, it is etymological and not phonetic. It is not difficult to see why this should be, as changes in the sound of words would naturally be faster than changes in their written form: that is, spelling lags behind pronunciation. All the same, we might have supposed that the spelling as we know it to-day would be more phonetic than it actually is, since writers up to the eighteenth century, before spelling was 'fixed', tended to spell phonetically, with little regard for etymology. However, tradition has triumphed, and against it the earnest activities of reformer have made little headway.

It is not within the purpose or the scope of this book to deal with the vexed question of English phonetics. A cele-

brated phonologist has observed that it would be possible to spell the word *fish* like this—*ghoti*—since in *rough* 'gh' has the sound of 'f', in *women* 'o' has the sound of 'i', and in the suffix *-tion* 'ti' has the sound of 'sh'; and Mr. Lloyd James, the expert in phonetics, has calculated that the word *scissors* could be spelt in no fewer than 596,580 different ways! This *reductio ad absurdum* of the arbitrary relationship of sounds and symbols in English serves to illustrate the first principle laid down in the previous paragraph. Other more detailed, if less startling, illustration is given in the present Chapter.

## II

Meanwhile, however, before we pass on to the historical development of spelling, it will be instructive to glance at one or two passages of English written between the time of the introduction of printing and the end of the seventeenth century. The first is from Caxton's own Preface to Malory's *Le Morte Arthur*, one of the earliest books ever printed in England:

... I have after the symple connyng that God hath sente to me, under the favour and correctyon of al noble lordes and gentylmen, emprysed to emprynte a book of the noble hystories of the sayd kynge Arthur, and of certeyn of his knyghtes, after a cople unto me delyvered, whyche cople Syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of frensshe and reduced it in to Englysshe. And I accordyng to my cople have doon sette it in enprynte, to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the Ientyl and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes. by whyche they came to honour. . . . Wherin they shalle fynde many Ioyous and playsaunt hystories, and noble and renommed actes of hymanyte, gentylnesse and chyvalryes. For herein may be seen noble chyualrye, Curtosye, Humanyte, frendlynnesse, hardynesse, loue, frendshyp, Cowardyse, Murdre, hate, vertue, and synne. Doo after the good and leue the euyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renomme.

In this passage the consistent use of the symbol *y* where Modern English would have *i* is observable; *i* appears only in prepositions (*in*) and pronouns (*it, this*). The French influence, too, is strong (*humanyte, playsaunt, murdre, renomnee*). We see also the use of the symbol *u* for modern *v* (*euyl, loue*), the retention of the final *e* (*oute, brynge*) and the single vowel *e* in a 'long' open syllable, where Modern English would have *ee* or *ea* (*dede, leue*).

The second is the first stanza of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590):

A gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,  
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,  
Wherein old dints of deepe woundes did remaine,  
The cruell markes of many a bloody field;  
Yet armes till that time did he never wield.  
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,  
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield;  
Full jolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,  
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt.

Here we have a spelling that approximates more closely to the modern, though Spenser was in general over-fond of archaisms. Its chief characteristics are the retention of the final *e*,—though the *e* is omitted in the *-ed* suffix of verbs (*seemd*),—and the double final consonant (*sitt, cruell, ycladd*).

The third is a passage from the First Folio (1623) text of Shakespeare's *King Henry V*:

For forth he goes, and visits all his Hoast,  
Bids them good morrow with a modest Smyle,  
And calls them Brothers, Friends, and Countreymen.  
Vpon his Royall Face there is no note,  
How dread an Army hath enrounded him;  
Nor doth he dedicate one iot of Colour  
Vnto the wearie and all-watched Night:  
But freshly lookes, and ouer-beares Attaint,



With chearefull semblance, and sweet Maiestie:  
 That euery Wretch, pining and pale before,  
 Beholding him, plucks comfort from his Lookes.  
 A Largesse vniuersall, like the Sunne,  
 His liberall Eye doth giue to euery one,  
 Thawing cold feare, that meane and gentle all  
 Behold, as may vnworthinesse define,  
 A little touch of *Harry* in the Night.

Here we note the final mute *e* (*feare, meane, sunne, unworthinesse*), the final *-ll* (*Royall, liberall, chearefull*), the *ey* in *Countreymen* and the *-ie* in *wearie*, the interchange of the symbols *v* and *u* for *u*, the *i* for the modern consonantal *j* (*iot, Maiestie*), and the digraphs in *boast* and *chearefull*.

And the fourth passage is from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Thus with the Year  
 Seasons return, but not to me returns  
 Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,  
 Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,  
 Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;  
 But cloud in stead, and ever-during dark  
 Surrounds me, from the chearful wayes of men  
 Cut off, and for the Book of knowledg fair  
 Presented with a Universal blanc  
 Of Nature's works to mee expung'd and ras'd,  
 And wisdome at one entrance quite shut out.

This is nearer to the modern usage. With two exceptions (*wayes, wisdom*) the final mute *e* has disappeared; *chearful* and *universal* are spelt with one final *l*; the vowel digraphs *ea, ai, oa, ou*, are established as in present standard spelling, though (as in *chearful*) they may not have their modern use. Interesting points are the omission of the apostrophe to mark the possessive (see page 155), and the spellings *mee, knowledg* and *blanc*.

### III

By the eighteenth century, and especially with the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary*, words had acquired, for the

most part, their modern form. We may note such survivals as *chearful*, *chuse* ('choose'), which is common in Jane Austen, the *u* in such words as *terroure* and *horroure* (see page 130), and the final *k* in, for example, *musick* and *frolick*. Johnson himself has *skeptick* and *politicks*. In this connexion, Milton's form *blanc*, quoted above, is of interest. Modern spelling has three separate symbols for the hard *k* sound, apart, that is, from the borrowed French *-que* in *picturesque*—*k* itself (*folk*, *work*, *blank*), *ck* in monosyllables that originally ended with hard *c* or *k* (*black*, *stick*) and hard *c* in polysyllables (*music*, *frolic*, *satiric*). Nevertheless in the eighteenth century spelling was still remarkably individual and phonetic. Whiteley (*Wesley's England*, Chap. viii) quotes such forms as *sparrergras* (for *asparagus*), *choclit*, *sittisen*, *interleck*, *biscket*.

## IV

Since that time—that is, during the nineteenth century and up to the present day—various writers have affected certain peculiarities or tried to introduce deliberate reforms, but without any appreciable effect on standard spelling. The nineteenth-century poets, especially Tennyson and Browning, used such forms as *stept*, *kisst* and *crossst* to avoid the rhythmical ambiguity of *stepped*, *kissed* and *crossed*. To-day, in standard spelling, we have the distinction between the pure verbal tense and participle *passed* and the adjectival or prepositional *past*. Mr. Bernard Shaw eschews the apostrophe in contracted words, writing *dont*, *cant* and *Ive*, though he retains the apostrophe in the possessive noun; and Robert Bridges, himself a keen spelling reformer, did not hesitate to introduce into his poems forms of his own invention, like *pepal* for *people*. But these are isolated instances. There is as yet no very strong organised movement towards the reform of English spelling. Tradition and prejudice are too strong; and it is undeniable that serious difficulties would arise from a change to an out-and-out phonetic system. Nevertheless, there are certain changes that could quite easily be made, in the name

of uniformity, and without offence to the most ardent etymologist. They are dealt with later in this chapter (page 130).

## V

We have seen that, in the main, our modern spelling is etymological; or, to put it another way, that changes in the spoken have been much faster than changes in the written word. The 'time-lag' in spelling is most easily observable in the words—many of them monosyllabic—which belong to the native language. There was in Anglo-Saxon a consonant sound which, owing to the softening influence of the Norman French that came later, has now disappeared from English. This is the guttural or 'throat-sound' which we associate with Modern German—we hear it when the wireless announcer pronounces the word *Reich*. In Anglo-Saxon it was, of course, represented by a particular symbol, usually *h* or *g*: *genog*, *niht*, *purh*, *poht*, *burh*, *hlæhh(an)*, *peah*. The Modern English spelling of these words—*enough*, *night*, *through*, *thought*, *burgh* (*borough*), *laugh*, *though*—keeps the guttural symbol, in the form of the digraph *gh*; but the sound has either been lost, or changed into *ff*; as in *enough* and *laugh*. Such forms are often cited as the stock examples of 'aberrations in English spelling'. In one of his letters to Robert Bridges, Henry Bradley tells a story of a little boy who was 'playing at church' with his sisters, and was heard to announce the hymn 'Fidget the good fidget with all thy midget'. However, etymology has prevailed, though contracted phonetic spellings like *thro'* or *thru*, *tho'*, and *boro'* are occasionally used. *Plough*, which is not a true Saxon word, appears as *plow* in the Authorised Version, and both Smollett and Sheridan have what may be called a dialect form, *thoff*, for *though*.

Sometimes Anglo-Saxon had before a consonant another consonantal sound which is lost in Modern English, though the symbol survives. Thus in the Anglo-Saxon words *cnaw(an)*, *cnotta*, *cnoc(ian)*, *cneo* and *cnif* the initial *c* was sounded as a guttural spirant, that is, a breath in the throat; but in the modern forms *know*, *knot*, *knock*, *knee* and *knife* it is silent.

So with the initial *g* in the Anglo-Saxon *gnæt* and *gnag(an)*, which are the Modern English *gnat* and *gnaw*.

## VI

More important is the consonant *h*. In modern English it is an aspirate or 'breath' as the initial letter of a first syllable or the stressed syllable elsewhere in the word. The main exceptions (*honour, hour, heir*) are due to the influence of French, in which the *h* is not normally aspirated. Most French and direct Latin derivatives, however, have the aspirated *h* in English. In words like *forehead*, where the second syllable is unstressed, the *h* is unsounded in modern standard pronunciation. In older English the *h* even in an initial syllable was very lightly aspirated, or not aspirated at all, as we deduce from such expressions as '*an* historical', '*an* house', '*an* humble', common in eighteenth-century literature. The Saxon word *hlæbhan*, in the list given above, reminds us that *h* could also stand, in sound as well as in spelling, before another consonant. *Loaf*, for example, was *hlaef* in Anglo-Saxon, and *loud* was *hlud*. In Modern English the *h* is never written before a consonant; but our pronouns and conjunctions which begin with *wh-* (*who, which, when, whether*) in Anglo-Saxon had initial *hw-* (*hwa, hwilc, hwan, hwæper*). The *h* prevails as the initial sound in *who* and its oblique cases, as well as in the words *whoop* and *whole*. All other words, however, have the *w* sound, sometimes, especially in Northern speech, with a slight aspiration. We also retain, but do not pronounce, the *h* of the Latin and Greek digraph *rh*—in, for example, *rheumatism, rhythm*.

## VII

An Anglo-Saxon *w* was sounded and written before the consonants *r* and *l*; it is still written, but not sounded, before *r*—*write, wren, wreck, wreath*. Other words have now a silent medial *w*: *answer*, from the Saxon *ond-swerian*, *sword* (A.-S. *sweord*) and *two* (A.-S. *twa*), though the *w* is pronounced in other words from the same root, *twice, twelve* and *between*.

This process of the elision of *w* is exemplified in two forms that occur in the opening lines of Chaucer's *Prologue*. The Anglo-Saxon *sweote* became both *swete*:

Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth,  
and *sote*:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote.

We also see this loss of medial *w* in the pronunciation of place names like *Woolwich*, *Norwich*, *Southwark*, in the common elision of the *w* sound in *toward* ('to'rd'), and in the naval 'forrard' for *forward*, which may be compared with the loss of medial unstressed *b* in *forehead* (page 116). As a final letter it is always vocalised, in association with *a*, *e* and *o* (*thaw*, *few*, *show*). In older spelling the symbol *w* was often used medially for the vowel *u*; forms like *sowre* and *howre* are common in the seventeenth century. Sam Weller reminds us that during one period, at least, in Cockney pronunciation, *v* and *w* were interchangeable. Old Tony Weller's instruction to the judge, 'Spell it with a we, my lord', is sufficient evidence of this colloquial usage, which dates back to the eighteenth century.

#### VIII

Other Anglo-Saxon consonants no longer sounded but still spelt are medial *l*—in *half*, *calf*, *should*, *would* and *could* (see page 124)—and final *b* in *climb*, *lamb*, *comb*, *dumb*. Sometimes, before spelling was fixed, these words were written phonetically. Herrick has *wo'd* for *would*, a form which Robert Bridges revived with slight modification (*wu'd*); and Milton has 'The oracles are dum' in the *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. The same process takes place in words of non-Saxon origin which contain a combination of the liquid consonants, *l*, *m*, *n*. Thus we have *calm*, *balm*, *psalm*, all derived through French, where the *l* is not sounded in Modern English, and *solemn*, *condemn*, *column*, in which the final *n* is mute. These final consonants survive in spelling because in the original forms they most often occurred, and were sounded, before an inflexional suffix, for example the Anglo-Saxon *climb-an* and the Latin

*solemnis*, *condemno*. Once the original inflexion disappeared, the consonant was left high and dry; but it 'comes back' before certain suffixes in Modern English—*solemnity*, *condemnation*, *columnist*. The Saxon final *b*, however, never regains its sound. We may note here two or three interesting doubtful examples: *kiln*, the standard pronunciation of which according to *S.O.E.D.* is *kil*, though *kiln*, with the *n*, is at least as common in Southern speech; the 'highbrow' pronunciation of *golf* as *gof*; and the colloquial *sodder* for *solder*.

## IX

The letter *r* plays some peculiar tricks. Before another consonant and at the end of words it is almost, if not quite, lost in modern standard pronunciation, though the 'trill' remains in Northern, and especially, Scottish, speech. Certain forms remind us of its disturbing effect on a preceding vowel. Thus we write *clerk*, but pronounce it as we usually spell it when it becomes a proper name—*Clark*. Similarly we have *Derby* ('Darby'), *stern* of a ship ('starn'), and *Berkshire* ('Barkshire'). The University man speaks of his 'varsity, and the countryman often says *sartainly* for *certainly*. *Errant*, from Latin *erro*, 'I wander', has the variant form in Modern English *arrant*: an 'arrant knave' was originally a wandering fellow. Chaucer following the French *parfait*, has *parfit* for *perfect* (see also page 120) and Swift complains of a contemporary shortening of *verdict* into *vardi*. In eighteenth-century verse words in *-er-* and *-ar-* often rhyme. Again Swift will afford an example:

And seem'd determin'd not to starve it,  
Because no age could more deserve it.

*Parson* is only a variant spelling of *person*, witness Chaucer's 'povre persoun of a toun', who was a country clergyman. *Merchant* has undergone a kind of reverse process. The French *marchand* gave the English *marchant*, again in the Chaucerian form, which now survives only as a proper name. In *merchant* the *r* has no influence on the preceding vowel, which harks back to the Latin *mercator*.

Some of our modern spellings and pronunciations reveal a peculiar propensity of *r* to change places with the vowel before or after it. Thus for the Anglo-Saxon *prid*, *pretiene*, *prutig*, *brid*, *brinnan*, *nose-þirl* we have *third*, *thirteen*, *thirty*, *bird*, *burn*, *nostril*. The *r* takes its original place in the cognate forms *three* and *brand*, which in the phrase 'brand of goods' reminds us of the 'burnt' trade-mark. *Firebrand* and 'a brand plucked from the burning' reveal the literal meaning. Chaucer's Squire had 'lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse', *crulle* being our Modern English *curly*. The Latin *turbula* gives us our direct derivative *turbulent*, but the *r* had already changed places in the corresponding French *trouble*, which was adopted with the same spelling in English. Milton sometimes writes *hunderd* for *hundred*; and that pronunciation is sometimes heard in country dialects even now. But *r* is not the only consonant which plays this kind of hide-and-seek; *s* is another. The Anglo-Saxon *lipsian* is our *lisp*, *acsian* is *ask* and *wæps* is *wasp*. The countryman often says *aks* to-day, and in Kent the common plural of *wasp* is *wapses*.

## X

But, as we have already seen, etymological spelling was not confined to native words. When the great Norman influx came in the Middle Ages, the French derivatives were, of course, gradually anglicised in both pronunciation and in their written form; so that most words dervied through French have a 'normal' spelling, subject to such inconsistencies as we have already discussed. In mediaeval texts there are, naturally, examples of French spelling. Chaucer, for example, has *chambre*, *mordre*, *tendre*, with the characteristic French *-re* now anglicised as *-er*. In the passage quoted from Caxton on page 111 we have in *humanite* the actual French *é* ending, which normally was represented by *-ee* (*charitee*, *jollitee*) in Chaucer and finally *-y* (*charity*, *humanity*). Modern French borrowings from past participle forms in *-e* have the *-ee* ending—*employee*, *mortgagee* and the very modern *evacuee*. Indeed, our treatment of direct borrowings (see page 27 ff.)

affords an instructive parallel, as well as contrast, to the treatment of true derivatives during the Middle Ages. For the most part, they keep their French spelling, whatever our English tongues make of them in pronunciation. We usually make a rather hesitating and doubtful attempt at the French sound; but if *blancmange* (which occurs in Chaucer:

For blankmanger, that made he of the beste,)

*lieutenant*, *charabanc*, *veillee*, *biscuit*, and a few others were spelt phonetically they would be almost as remote from their original form as Sir Toby's *kickshaws* (*Twelfth Night*, i. 3), is from *quelquechoses*. We see the process of anglicisation actually at work to-day in the word *envelope* (French *enveloppe*), which some—usually older—people pronounce *onvelope*, in an unsuccessful attempt at the French nasal, and others in a straightforward English fashion, *envelope*. As another corruption, similar to *kickshaws*, we have already noted (page 65) *puny*, from the French *puisne*. Corruptions of this kind are common in the speech of those who have no, or little, acquaintance with French. *Wipers* for *Xpres* and 'san fairy Ann' for 'ça ne fait rien' were notable examples among British soldiers during the war of 1914-18, who also converted the Persian *baksheesh* (a present, a tip), which entered the language in 1735, into what has now become the accepted colloquialism *buckshee*.

## XI -

But there was in some words a tendency to get back to a Latin form, in spite of a pronunciation and early spelling that was based on the French. A good example is the word *victuals*, so spelt in Modern English, but pronounced 'vittles'. The Old French form was *vitaile*, which appears in Chaucer:

But al with riche and sellers of vitaille.

But the late Latin neuter plural *victualia* gives us our standard spelling and probably accounts for its usual plural form. Other examples are *perfect* (Latin *perfectum*), which as we



have already seen (page 118), Chaucer spelt *parfit*, from the French *parfait*; *debt* and *doubt*, which occur in Chaucer in their French forms *dette* and *doute*, but whose modern spelling is based upon the Latin *debitum* and *dubitum*; and *receipt* which derives not from the French *recette* but from the Latin *receptum*. We may note also the normal retention in English of the Latin digraph *ph* (Greek phi) for the *f* sound where French has *f*- as in French *fantome*, *faisan*, English *phantom*, *pheasant*. English itself has the *f* in *fancy* and *fantasy*, but prefers the *ph* in the cognate word *phantasm*.

Etymological spelling has retained the silent initial *p* in words of Greek origin such as *psalm*, *pneumatic*, *psychology*, *ptomaine*, and the *m* in *mnemonic*. *Psalm* came very early into English, and was originally spelt phonetically—*sealm*. Chaucer has *sautrye* for *psalter*. We have also in Greek derivatives the hard digraph, *ch*, representing the Greek *k*. It occurs in such words as *chord*, *distich*, *psychology*. The following limerick provides an amusing commentary on such Greek survivals:

There was a young lady named Psyche  
 Who was heard to ejaculate 'Pcryche!'  
 For when riding her pbych  
 She ran over a ptych  
 And fell on a fence that was pspyche.

Words beginning with *arch*- present a difficulty. Their common root is the Greek prefix *arki*- meaning 'chief'; but in early English the prefix came to us through the French, which had soft *ch*, and gave us *archbishop*, *archdeacon*, *archduke*. *Archangel*, a French derivative, has hard *ch* for the sake of euphony. In later learned derivatives the hard sound of the Greek is retained: *architect*, *archive*, *archaic*, *archidiaconal*. *Choir* is an interesting example of a restored etymological spelling. Old English had the phonetic form *quire*, as in the phrase 'quires and places where they sing' in the English Prayer Book, but standard spelling has preferred *choir*, after the pattern of the original *chorus*.

Sometimes false etymology has affected the spelling of a

word. In *greyhound*, for example, the first element is not, as it appears to be, the adjective *grey*, but *grig*, a word of unknown origin and meaning. Chaucer has a form that is nearer to the original:

Grehoundes he hadde, as swifte as fowel in flight.

*Sovereign*, whose modern spelling suggests some connexion with *reign*, is the French *souverain*, which up to the eighteenth century appeared as *soveran* in English, and is sometimes so spelt by purists even now. Milton writes (*Nativity Ode*):

As if they knew their soveran Lord was by.

We also have an intrusive *g* in *foreign*, which is ultimately derived from Latin *foris*, 'out-of-doors'. *Delight* (French *délice*) and *spright* (sprite, a form of *spirit*) have erroneously taken to themselves the characteristic guttural symbol, *gh*, of Saxon formations (see page 115). *Cray-fish* is a false compound from the Old French *crevice*, a word derived from the same root as *crab*. The second half, *-vice*, suggested *fish* in English. *Causeway* should be, and is in certain dialects, *causey*. It is derived from the Old French word *caucie*, the Modern French *chausée*. The second element in *shamefaced* was originally *fast*, 'fixed'; it has no etymological connexion with *face*. But here, as in *causey* the process of corruption is clear and easily explicable. Another false, but rather attractive, corruption is *mushroom* from the French *mousseron*, probably allied to *mousse* ('moss'). The common spelling *hiccough* falsely assumes the derivation of this word from *cough*; *hiccup*, the alternative and true spelling, preserves the original onomatopœic or 'echoic' formation. *Island* is the result of an interesting confusion. The Saxon word was *ige*, which we have in Sheppey ('the Sheep isle'), Anglesey, and eyot. To this was often added the word *lond*, and the ordinary mediaeval spelling of the compound was *ilond*. But side by side with *ige* there existed the Old French *isle*, Modern French *île*, from the Latin *insula*, and by an etymological error the *s* crept into the Saxon form; so that *isle* is, and *island* is not, an etymological form. This

intrusive *s* was carried over by another confusion, into the word *aisle*, which derives from Latin *ala*, a wing.

## XII

One or two words have had queer adventures in spelling arising from confused etymology. Thus *abominable* is now true to its origin, *ab* + *omen*, but up to the seventeenth century it was spelt *abhominable*, as if it were derived from Latin *ab homine*, 'away from man', 'inhuman'. *Rhyme* is the Greek word *rhuthmos* 'flow', a form of the word *rhythm*, which has been influenced by its supposed connexion with the Anglo-Saxon *riman*, 'count'. *Rime* was, and still is, a common alternative spelling. *Ache* is another interesting word. There were originally a verb *ake* and a noun *ache*, with a soft *ch*, like *bake* and *batch* (see page 50). But from the time of Johnson, who derived the word erroneously from the Greek *akos*, the *ch* has been hard in both noun and verb. Shakespeare said 'aitch', and makes a punning joke on the word in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

*Beat.* By my troth, I am exceeding ill. Heigh-ho!

*Marg.* For a hawk, a horse, or a husband?

*Beat.* For the letter that begins them all, H.

*Acorn* has been slightly influenced in spelling by its supposed derivation from the Anglo-Saxon *ac* ('oak')—'the fruit of the oak-tree'. Actually, it comes from the Saxon *æcer*, a field, and means (any) fruit that grows in the open. Its normal modern form would be *acern* or *acren*. But perhaps the most remarkable example of a mistaken form is *helpmeet*, a compound erroneously made from the noun and adjective in the sentence 'But for Adam there was not found a help meet for him.' (Genesis, ii. 20. A.V.). The parallel and more normal *helpmate* was a later formation.

## XIII

*Admiral* is another noteworthy example of etymological confusion. It is derived from the Arabic *amir* ('prince') with

the particle *al*, which existed in Arabic compounds like *amir-al-bahr*, 'Ameer of the Sea' (*S.O.E.D.*); but was afterwards connected with the Latin *admirabilis*, and so gained its intrusive *d*. Milton (*Paradise Lost*, i) uses the etymological spelling:

His spear, to equal which the tallest Pine  
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the Mast  
Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand,

where, however, *ammiral* is used in the sense 'flag-ship'. Another example of the same type of confusion is *advantage* (see page 95).

False etymology is, indeed, an entrancing subject. In an interesting chapter of his *Something About Words* Professor Weekley quotes from an eighteenth-century etymologist, George Lemon, who derived 'practically the whole of the English vocabulary from Greek', and also from his more famous contemporary Horne Tooke, who, in his *Diversions of Purley*, ventured upon some most astonishing derivations. *Heaven*, he said, is what is *heaved*, a *wench* is one who is *winked* at, and the *bark* of a tree and the *bark* of a dog are both from *beorgan*, to protect. From that it is not a long step to the amateur etymologist who declared that *woman* was derived from *woe* and *man*.

Dean Swift, who (as we have already noted) had a great interest in language, wrote a characteristic essay called *The Antiquity of the English Tongue*, in which he satirises the false etymologists. With all the solemnity in the world, he gives a fantastic derivation of certain Classical and Biblical proper names. Neptune, he says, 'had his name from the *tunes* sung to him by the Tritons, every *neap* or *nep* tide'; Moses 'was in propriety of speech called *mow seas*, because he mowed the *seas* down in the middle to make a path for the Israelites'; and Isaac 'is nothing else but *Eyes ache*, because the Talmudists report that he had a pain in his eyes'. But his most amusing invention is the etymology of Alexander the Great:

Alexander the Great was very fond of eggs roasted in hot ashes. As soon as his cooks heard he was come home to dinner or supper, they called aloud to their under-officers, *All eggs under the grate*; which, repeated every day at noon and evening, made strangers think it was that prince's real name, and therefore gave him no other; and posterity has been ever since under the same delusion.

## XIV

Analogy sometimes has an effect on spelling. A very familiar example is *could*, which has its *l* only on the analogy of *would* (A.-S. *wolde*). It is the past tense, *cupe*, of the Anglo-Saxon *cunnan*, 'know'—a form which survives in our adjective *uncouth*. The Chaucerian spelling is *coude*, the intrusive *l* developing only in the seventeenth century. *Whole* is of the same root as *health*, *holy* and *hale*, in 'hale and hearty'. The initial *w* developed in the fifteenth century. Chaucer uses the etymological form:

God loved he best with al his hole herte.

*Ghost* acquired its *b* from none other than the first English printer, Caxton. It is the Anglo-Saxon *gast*, and is spelt *goost* in Chaucer. In *guess* and *guest* the *u* is intrusive, probably on the analogy of words like *guard*, which contain the Central French *gu-* (see page 51). It is some indication of the vagaries of early spelling that Donne, in the seventeenth century, spells *guest* with an *b*: •

When my grave is broke up againe  
Some second ghest to entertaine. . . .

Here, as in *ghost*, the *b* is possibly associated with the *g* on the analogy of the many Saxon words which, as we have seen, have the digraph *gh* for the old guttural; though Weekley (*Etymological Dictionary*) suggests that Caxton's spelling of *ghost* was influenced by a cognate Flemish form *gheest*. Sometimes an intrusive consonant develops in the interests of euphony, or ease of pronunciation. The *b* in *number*, *chamber*,

*humble*, from Latin *numerus*, *camera*, *humilis*, existed already in the French forms from which the English words are derived, but the medial *d* of *thunder* is not in the French *tonnerre* or the final *d* of *sound* in the French *sonner*, Latin *sonare*. Chaucer, however, has the spelling without the *d*:

Was never trompe of half so greet a soun.

In Shakespeare *swoon* similarly acquires a final *d*:

But soft, I pray you: what! did Caesar swound?

In the same way, *peasant* and *pheasant* have an intrusive final *t* (French, *paysan*, *faisan*).

Chaucer writes *solempne* (the final *e* is sounded). We are conscious that this intrusive *p* tends to develop, though it is not written, between the two liquids *m* and *n*, when we say the words *solemnity* and *autumnal*.

#### XV

'A lot of words', says Bradley in a letter to Robert Bridges, 'will have to perish from the language if we get phonetic spelling. When *queen* and *quean* came to be pronounced alike, the latter was inevitably doomed to become obsolete in speech'. That opens up an interesting line of thought, reminding us how many pairs or groups of homophones we have in English which are automatically distinguished in writing because spelling is etymological. Bradley himself gives as examples *sight*, *site* and *cite*, but there are, of course, hundreds of others, like *beech*—*beach*, *their*—*there*, *right*—*rite*, *soul*—*sole*, *weak*—*week*, *read*—*reed*, *strait*—*straight*. When Latin, French and Saxon influence one another, or happen to meet, such pairs are often born; and no doubt Bradley is right in saying that but for the happy accident (or design) of etymological spelling, from many of them one would have been taken and the other left.

Indeed, when etymology fails to make the distinction it has often been made artificially. There was, for example, in Shakespeare's language, no difference in writing between *to* as a

preposition or adverb particle and *to* as a pure adverb; but standard spelling, for the sake of convenience, has given the adverbial *to*, in certain senses, another *o*. So *off* is a variant of *of*, as an adverb or preposition of 'place'—'to get off a chair', 'to set off'—and always in compounds, *offside*, *offchance*. The noun *inn* is distinguished from the preposition and adverb *in*. Chaucer goes so far as to vary the spelling of the preposition according as it stands before or after the word it governs:

And eek in what array that they were inne.

*Then* and *than* (see also page 184) are by origin identical words; and up to the seventeenth century *then* was the spelling in all uses. Donne writes, for example:

Difference of sex no more wee knew  
Then our Guardian Angells do.

But in Modern English the useful and important distinction is made between *then* the adverb and *than* the conjunction. The Anglo-Saxon *þurh* has given us two differentiated forms: *through*, by metathesis of *r* (see page 119), which is normally a preposition or an adverb, and *thorough*, which is an adjective in Modern English with the meaning 'complete', 'through and through'. Shakespeare uses *thorough* as a preposition:

Thorough bush, thorough brier,

and we have the adverbial use in the compound *thoroughfare*, 'a through-going'.

Comparatively modern examples of differentiation are seen in certain French borrowings—*suit* of clothes or cards, *suite* of furniture; *artist* in the general and *artiste* in the theatrical sense; *envelope* as a noun and *envelop* as a verb; *moral* as an adjective and *morale* as a noun, meaning the spirit, the general state of mind of troops or people, especially in time of war. Oddly enough, the French spelling of this word is *moral*, without the *e*, and this form is sometimes used by purists in English. But Fowler (*M.E.U.*) condemns this as an unnecessary pedantry that only leads to confusion, and argues for the

standardisation of the spelling in *-e*. Another useful modern distinction is that between *flour* and *flower*, which are in reality the same word: flour is the 'flower' of the wheat. Chaucer used *flour*, and later English, before spelling was fixed, has *flower* in both senses. So *astrology* developed in late Middle English as a variant of *astronomy*, with the specialised meaning, which it retains to-day, of the practical application of astronomy, the science of the stars. The word, however, does not occur in Shakespeare, and Chaucer's doctor, who was what we should call an astrologer, was 'grounded in astronomye'. It is a surprising fact that *story*, meaning narrative, and *story* meaning one of the floors or stages of a building are one and the same word. Weekley suggests that *story* (of a building) 'may originally have referred to tiers of "storied" windows or sculptures corresponding to the different floors'. Milton's line:

And storied windows richly dight

seems to support this view. But however that may be, there is a tendency in modern spelling to differentiate the two words—*story* and *storey*. Finally we may note the convenient modern distinction, *c* for the noun and *s* for the verb, in the pairs *practice—practise*, *licence—license*, *advise—advise*, *device—devise* and *prophecy—prophesy*, only the first two of which are, however, actually homophones.

## XVI

But although this clash between etymology and sound is interesting and, indeed, accounts for many of the inconsistencies in our spelling, it is not, after all, responsible for its real difficulties. It may, in fact, as we have already seen, sometimes turn to our advantage. Very few of the words cited as examples in the preceding pages would give the average speller any real trouble, even if he knew little Latin and less Greek. The difficulties arise rather from certain irrational exceptions that are said to prove the rule, many of which could be eliminated without in any way obscuring origins or offending



against tradition. Indeed, a strong case could be made out for a modified spelling reform which would do no more than rid the language of unnecessary irregularities. A few suggestions concerning such reform are made here in the belief that their adoption would be of advantage both to the native writers and to that increasing number of foreigners to whom English may become a second language.

Fowler (*M.E.U.*) says: 'If a list were made of the many thousands of words whose spelling cannot be safely inferred from their sound, the doubtful point in perhaps nine-tenths of them would be whether some single consonantal sound was given by a single consonant, as *m* or *t* or *c*, a double consonant, as *mm*, or *tt*, or two or more as *sc*, *cq*, or *sch*'. When it is a question of double or single consonant in the integral form of a word no rule can be given. Such words as *mattress*, *necessary*, *parallel*, *paraffin*, *embarrass*, *battalion*, *panel*, *petal*, *comity*, *committee*, *possession* must be learnt, as it were, by rote, and locked up in the memory. In *sc* words (*conscience*, *ascend*) and *cq* words (*acquiesce*, *acquaint*) etymology will come to the rescue for those who have the necessary knowledge of French and Latin; and a recognition of word stems, especially those of Latin origin, together with an understanding of the process of assimilation (see page 103) will settle the question of double consonants that occur from the addition of affixes, as in *in-nocent*, *ir-regular*, *dis-sent*, *ad-duce*, *il-legal*, *with-hold*, *green-ness*. The real trouble arises over the doubling of a single consonant before a suffix beginning with a vowel. There is a working rule—in monosyllables ending with single vowel plus single consonant, double the consonant (*sadder*, *running*, *furry*, *stopped*); in polysyllables ending with single vowel plus single consonant, double the consonant only if the final syllable of the stem is stressed (*beginning*, *preferred*, but *happening*, *preference*). Unluckily, one or two consonants are apt to kick over the traces, notably *l*, *p* and *s*. Among the monosyllables *gases* and the more modern *buses* are the chief exceptions; in polysyllables *l* nearly always doubles, wherever the stress falls (*traveller*, *tunnelling*), the chief exceptions—

which, however, follow the main rule—being *devilish* and *unparalleled*, while *p* and *s* are variable—*biased* or *biassed*, *focused* or *focussed*, *worshipping*, *gossiping*. A careful standardisation of usage in the matter of double consonants would certainly rid us of some spelling difficulties. One of the earliest of spelling reformers, the monk Orm, who wrote the poem called *Ormmulum* (c. 1200), used double consonants for special phonetic purposes, chiefly to indicate that a preceding vowel was short. His experiment, however, would probably not commend itself to more modern enthusiasts for reform:

... fra land to land, fra burrh to burrh  
 to spellenn to þe lede  
 off soþ Crist annd off crisstendom  
 annd off þe rihhte læfe,  
 annd off þatt lif, þatt ledeþþ menn  
 upp inntill heffness blisse.

## XVII

One of the surest indications that we are reading an American book is that certain words end in *-or* which in English end in *-our*; and here American practice might well be our guide. Up to the eighteenth century the *u* was kept in several words which have now lost it, like *terroure*, *horroure*, *gouvernour*, *authour*. But though in Modern English we have *terror*, *horror*, *governor* and *author*, we stick to the *u* in *humour*, *honour*, *splendour*, *colour*, *vapour*, *favour*. Why not rid ourselves of this unnecessary *u*? If we ventured on so logical a reform we should eliminate into the bargain the difficulties which arise in such derivative formations as the following: *humorous*, *humorist*, *honourable*, *honorary*, *vaporise*, *authority*, *evaporate*, *favourable*. *Humorist*, by the way, is indicative of a modern tendency towards the suggested reform. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) says uncompromisingly: '*Humour* makes *humorous* but *humourist*, though his own Dictionary (*C.O.D.*) gives *humorist* as the only spelling. *S.O.E.D.* (1933) gives *humorist* as the standard but allows *humourist* as an alternative form; *Chambers* (1943)

admits only *humorist*. We may also note here the strange inconsistency by which we drop the *u* in two derivatives of the Saxon numeral *four*—*forty* and *fortnight* ('fourteen-night').

## XVIII

Words in *-ise* and *-ize* present a problem which most ordinary people are content to ignore. The differentiation is kept alive mainly by the custom of printing houses. For *-ize* it may be said that it is truly phonetic and nearly always etymological, since most words in *-ize* are derived from Greek verbs in *-izein* or Latin *-izare*. But the trouble is that a number of words of different derivation must be spelt in *-ise* unless their origin is to be hopelessly obscured. Fowler gives twenty-one of them, including *advertise*, *surprise* and *despise*, all derived from French; but he does not mention that in the eighteenth century (for example, in Jane Austen) the commonest of them, *surprise*, was spelt with a *z*. However, for the sake of this score or so of unrighteous words it would seem reasonable, in defiance of both phonetics and etymology but in the cause of uniformity, to standardise the *-ise* form. Indeed, as Fowler admits, popular prejudice, aided and abetted by ignorance, runs in favour of this desirable simplification; but the weight of the University Presses and, surprisingly, of American usage, is at present against it.

## XIX

We have seen (page 127) how in modern spelling we sometimes make an artificial distinction between related words by doubling a letter, consonant or vowel, in monosyllables. In older spelling the usage was variable. Thus the pronoun *me* was often spelt *mee*, but on the other hand *thee* often appears as *the*. Perhaps the fixing of the form *thee* in Modern English is another example of artificial distinction, to avoid confusion with the definite article. Words in *-l*, *-ll*, are of special importance. Up to the seventeenth century the practice was the reverse of that which obtains to-day: the single *l* was customary in monosyllables (*al*, *wel*, *wil*, *fal*) and *ll* in polysyllables

(*royall, universall*). Perhaps this accounts for our modern confused practice when monosyllables in *ll* are compounded. *F'ull* always loses one *l* (*beautiful, fulfil, fulsome*), but others vary. We have *wilful* but *freewill, welcome* but *farewell*. Others sometimes get us in two minds—*befal'* or *befall*? *dulness* or *dullness*? *fulness* or *fullness*? All which argues strongly for some rational control of this unnecessarily troublesome letter.

## XX

A glance at any early English text, like the passage from Caxton on page 111, will reveal the fact that the symbol *y* occurs where Modern English has *i*. 'This free use of *y*', says the *S.O.E.D.*, 'continued long after the introduction of printing, but usage has now restored *i*, except (i) in final *i*-sounds of all but alien words; (ii) for Greek upsilon (*u*); (iii) in verb inflexions before *i*, as in *lying*; (iv) in plurals of nouns in *-ay, -ey, and -oy*'.

Certain words, mainly of Greek origin, hesitate between the two symbols. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) gives guiding rules and suggestions, but for once modern custom allows a pleasant latitude. It is comforting to think we may write *gipsy* for *gypsy*, *pigmy* for *pygmy*, *syphon* for *siphon*, *cypher* for *cipher*, and *tyre* for *tire* without blame, except from the over-pedantic. In all these pairs the 'wrong' form is the one that obscures the etymology; thus *gipsy* fails to remind us that the word is derived from *Egyptian*, and *pigmy* that the root is the Greek *pugme*, the length from the elbow to the knuckles. *Tyre* has established itself as the standard modern form, though it is etymologically connected with *attire*. But, on the whole, these words are best left, in Sam Weller's phrase, 'to the taste and fancy of the speller'.

## XXI

We have seen (page 119) that in early spelling English tended to keep the French form of words in *-re*; most of them have since taken the spelling in *-er*. A few, however, have withstood the change, like *centre, theatre, manoeuvre, fibre*,

*acre*, *lucre*. All these, except *acre* and *lucre* in which a following *e* would soften the *c*, have the *-er* spelling in American and might well have it in English. An eighteenth-century spelling book gives the forms *center*, *meter*, *favor*, *honor*, *travelér*. One distinction is worth noting. The word *metre* was adopted through the French *metre* first, in the fourteenth century, as the technical term in verse, and then (late eighteenth century) as the name of the official unit of measure. The form in combination is, however, *-meter*, as in *thermometer*, *perimeter*. But the word *meter* in modern hyphenated compounds, *gas-meter* and the like, is a revival of a late Middle English word *meter*, which meant 'one who measures'.

We may note here the alternation of *i* and *y* in modern English spelling. In general, *y* is the symbol for the sound at the end of a word (*lady*, *donkey*, *country*, *jolly*) but undergoes the change into *i* before a suffix, provided the *y* is preceded by a consonant (*ladi-es*, *countrified*, *jollity*, but *donkeys*). Older English, however, had such spellings as *donkies*, *vallies*, where the vowel before the *y* is ignored, or assimilated to the *i* itself (*valle-i-es* becomes *vallies*). It is, indeed, a matter for regret that this spelling convention did not survive; for it has against it the force of neither sound nor etymology. A few monosyllables ending in *y* present difficulties. For the most part they retain the *y* before a following syllable (*shyly*, *slyness*) but *dry* hesitates between *y* and *i*: *dryness*, *drier*, *drily*. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) advocated the spelling with *y* for all such words, though somewhat inconsistently he would retain the *i* in agent nouns from monosyllabic verbs—*crier* and *plier(s)*.

## XXII

The alternation of *f* and *v* also causes difficulty, since modern usage is variable and inconsistent. We have, for example, such forms as *hoofs*, *roofs*, *loaves*, *leaves*, *chiefs*, *leafy*, *thieves*, *wharfs*, *scarves*, *wives*, *housewifery*. In each of these, the spelling is phonological—that is, the *f* stands for the hard and the *v* for the soft sound. But the process by which one or other of these sounds has established itself appears to be arbitrary—why,

that is, we say *roofs* and not *loafs*, *leafy* and not *leavy*, *thieves* and not *chieves*. Some of the examples quoted here have, indeed, alternative forms *hooves*, *wharves*, *scarfs*, *leavy* (in poetic language). The real doubt lies rather with pronunciation than with spelling, and there seems little prospect of resolving it. One pair of alternatives has given us a useful doublet. From *staff* we get *staffs*, the plural when the word is used in the sense 'employees under the direction of a manager or chief' (*S.O.E.D.*), probably associated with the meaning 'baton'; and *staves*, which is the plural in musical notation, and in the concrete sense ('staves of a chair'). In two words *vixen* (feminine of *fox* with *i*-mutation—see page 152) and *vat*, initial *v* has established itself in preference to the *f* common in older English. The Authorised Version has the *f* spelling: 'And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the fats shall overflow with wine and oil'.

## XXIII

The question of the omission or retention of a final mute *e* before a suffix sometimes arises. Fowler suggests the simple rule that it is always retained before a suffix beginning with a consonant, and therefore advocates *judgement*, *acknowledgement*, *abridgement* instead of the spellings without the *e*. He adds, as a formal rule, that the mute *e* is dropped before a vowel, with the exception 'that it is kept if it is needed to preserve or emphasise the soft sound of a preceding *g* or *c*'. This is a simplification which may well recommend itself to reformers, since the question, to retain or to omit, sometimes troubles us all. Unfortunately some words are obstinate. Fowler's rule, for example, gives us *singeing* from *singe*, but *binging* from *hinge*; against which form most of us rebel, since it seems to imply the simple verb *bing*, corresponding with *sing*. There is not, perhaps, the same objection to *milage* for the more familiar *mileage*; but *mileage* is likely to prevail if only to prevent the pronunciation *mil(l)age*. Fowler gives his support to *milage* on the somewhat irrelevant plea that *despiteous* (originally *despitous*) since it retained the *e* has

developed the pronunciation *dispitius*, and etymologically allied itself to *pity*, not to *spite*. From *pity* itself we have *piteous* as a parallel formation, which is so spelt (with an *e*) to avoid *pitious* as a dissyllable with a 'soft' *t*. *Beauteous* from *beauty* is in the same category.

The chief exceptions to his consonant rule, *truly*, *duly*, *wholly*, Fowler rather blandly dismisses as 'individual exceptions merely'. But there seems to be no real objection, other than the strong power of custom, to their coming into line (*truely*, *duely*, *wholely*). It is a pity that *hieing* cannot follow the example of *dying*, *lying*, from *die* and *lie*. On the other hand, *dyeing* (from *dye*) is a useful artificial distinction to avoid confusion with *dying*. In general, to follow Fowler's rule would rid spelling of a few unnecessary and trivial doubts; though the one or two 'exceptions' mentioned here, which have been sanctified by popular prejudice and a modicum of reason, would have to remain.

Such minor reforms as are suggested here, though desirable, are unlikely except as they arise naturally with the progress and growth of the language. In spelling as in all other matters English has always resisted academic authority. Often our spelling defies phonetics; frequently it defies etymology; and sometimes it ignores both. Like Topsy, it has 'just growed', and we have to accept it as it is. But the fact remains that it is unduly troublesome, and cannot but hinder—at any rate to some extent—the adoption of English as a world language, to be written by those who are not by birth accustomed, as we are, to its tricks and oddities.

## XXIV

It is, of course, literally true that the spoken language of to-day is the result of all the changes in the sound or pronunciation of words that has developed during the centuries. Many of these have been referred to earlier in this chapter, in connexion with spelling. The laws of phonology, or sound-change, are indeed highly technical and sometimes compli-

cated; they can be mastered only by special study which involves a knowledge of the primitive language from which English sprang, and of other languages to which it is related. There is evidence in our modern language of changes that took place even before the Anglo-Saxon period, like *i*-mutation (page 152), gradation, or the change of vowel in strong verbs (page 167), and variations of consonant as in *bake*—*batch* and *wake*—*watch*. Any detailed treatment of such changes is beyond the scope of this book. There are, however, several points of interest in the pronunciation of words during the modern period, that is, since the time of Shakespeare. For we must remember that in pronunciation, as in all other departments, the language is 'living'; it does not, in the words of the collect, 'continue in one stay'.

But first of all we are faced with the difficulty that we do not know for certain how the men and women of three centuries ago actually spoke. Probably they were more deliberate, and gave greater value to the separate syllables and sounds of words than we do to-day. Thus Abbott, in his *Shakespearean Grammar*, notes on metrical evidence that, for example, final *-er* 'seems to have been sometimes pronounced with a kind of burr, which produced the effect of an additional syllable, just as *Sirrah* is another and more vehement form of *Sir*'; and that the suffix *-ion*, as in *salvation*, was often a dissyllable. No doubt, too, certain vowels and consonants were pronounced differently. For this we have considerable evidence in Shakespeare. We have already seen, for example, (page 123) that he pronounced *ache* as *aitch*. The obscurity of some of his puns and plays on words to the modern reader depends upon this fact. Thus when we read in *Julius Caesar*:

Then is it Rome indeed, and room enough  
When there is in it but one only man,

we are conscious of word-play only when we realise that *Rome* was pronounced like *room* in Elizabethan days. Similarly, the pun in the line from *Much Ado About Nothing*:



Note notes, forsooth, and nothing,

is only evident when we know that *nothing* was pronounced *noting*. There are scores of other examples; and they form, indeed, a valuable guide to Shakespearian pronunciation.

Sometimes a rhyme gives a clue to pronunciation, though we cannot rely on our deductions, since rhymes are not necessarily technically correct. It is noticeable, for example, that Shakespeare frequently rhymes words containing the short *a* with those containing the short *o*, as in:

thou shalt know the man  
By the Athenian garments he hath on.

Some scholars consider such pairs to be mere examples of defective rhyming, but others argue that they prove that, in Shakespearian times, the *a* in such words as *man* was pronounced like short *o*, as it still is in Scotland (*mon*) and in certain English words like *what*, *wan* and *quagmire*. However, the rhyme test is safer when we take our examples from the early eighteenth-century poets, who were usually more 'correct' than the Elizabethans. Pope's

And thou, great Anna, whom three realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea,

and Swift's

Hobbes clearly proves that every creature  
Lives in a state of war by nature,

point, for example, to the conclusion that *tea* and *creature* both had the long *a* instead of the modern long *e* sound. In the same poem ('On Poetry') Swift rhymes *flea* and *prey* and *reign* and *intervene*. We have seen elsewhere, from the same kind of evidence, that the *er* sound (as in *desert*) was often pronounced *ar* as it still is in *clerk*.

Such evidence is an interesting guide to actual changes of pronunciation that have taken place during the last three or four hundred years. It is also a remarkable fact that before

the fixing of a more or less standard pronunciation in comparatively modern times all kinds of corruptions and what we should now call vulgarisms abounded in English speech. We know this from the spelling of ordinary documents, like letters and diaries, as well as literature itself belonging to the period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In Shakespeare, we find certain peculiar spellings which betoken a colloquial or vulgar pronunciation in his time, like *cansticke* for *candlestick* (*i Henry IV*), *parlous* for *perilous*, used by Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *ignomy* for *ignominy* (*Measure for Measure*). Bottom's *parlous* survives, as an interesting doublet, chiefly in the phrase 'in a parlous state or condition'. So Ben Jonson and Spenser have *dis'ple* for *disciple* and other Elizabethan writers *genman* for *gentleman*. Unaspirated words were often aspirated—*ale* and *able* were, for example, frequently spelt, and presumably pronounced, *hale* and *hable*. On the other hand, initial *h* was frequently dropped—a practice which is now always condemned as a vulgarism. Final consonants, especially *g*, were often lost, as they are in *careless* or *affected* speech to-day. 'Good huntin' and good shootin'' is a survival of the familiar language of the eighteenth-century squire. We have already seen (page 118) that Swift instances the common pronunciation of *verdict* as *vardi*. Miss Davies gives many other examples, including *husbon*, *thousen* and *worll* (for *world*). It is important to remember, when we deplore carelessness or corruption in modern speech, that it has a long and respectable history behind it. Such examples as have been quoted (and there are many more) are, indeed, only extreme witnesses to that tendency in pronunciation which has shaped the form of many modern English words; a tendency whose result we have already seen in Chapter III.

## XXV

English, unlike French, is a language in which stress plays an important part; that is to say, in dissyllabic and polysyllabic

<sup>1</sup> The subject is fully dealt with in *English Pronunciation from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, by Constance Davies.

words (with few exceptions) the stress, or accent, will fall more heavily on one syllable than on another. We see (page 167) how this variation of stress in primitive times gave rise to 'gradation', the change of vowel in the parts of strong verbs. So, in modern pronunciation, the quality of a vowel is affected by stress. The B.B.C. pamphlet *Broadcast English* gives as an example the vowel in the word *man*, which, 'as the word is said, usually possesses a certain acoustic quality and a certain length; if the word is placed in a position where it does not carry what we know as the stress, e.g., *postman*, the quality and length of the vowel are altered'. It becomes, in fact, blurred or neutral—an indefinable sound which is represented in most phonetic systems as an inverted e (ə). Thus it is impossible, in standard speech, to distinguish between the unstressed vowel sounds in the suffixes *-ible* and *-able*, or the suffixes *-er*, *-ar*, *-or*, *-our*, *-ur*. Not that this blurring of unstressed vowels causes any difficulties in actual pronunciation, since it is a natural and inevitable process in the language; but it does give rise to doubts and difficulties in spelling, since the sound of the spoken gives no clue to the form, that is, the spelling, of the written word.

One of the most formidable difficulties in pronunciation arises from uncertainty as to the occurrence of the stress in many, especially polysyllabic, words. In actual fact, there is, as we have already seen, no authority in English with power to decree that the stress falls either here or there. Dictionaries themselves differ, or give alternatives without comment. The B.B.C. pamphlet already quoted observes that in English 'there is no known principle that governs the incidence of stress'. It expresses the opinion, however, that 'there would appear to be a tendency to place the stress in long words as near to the beginning as possible', but that against this there is 'the utilitarian principle of keeping the original accent of the root on all its derivatives'. Of the first tendency Fowler (*M.E.U.*) gives, under the heading Recessive Accent, half a dozen representative examples: *aggrandize*, *recondite*, *obdurate*, *contrary*, *equerry*, *demonstrate*. In each of these the stress in

Modern English falls on the first syllable, though 'they were long pronounced in English with the stress on the middle syllable'. It may be noted, however, that *contráry* is still fairly common, perhaps with an unconscious memory of the nursery rhyme:

Mary, Mary, quite contráry,  
How does your garden grow?

The position of the stress in *démonstrate* is not retained in its derivatives *demonstrátion* and *demónstrative*; and the parallel word *remónstrate* is, according to all good authorities, accented on the second syllable. Both *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers* give *recóndite* as an alternative to *récondite*, but the B.B.C., against Fowler, recommends only *recóndite*.

Interesting examples cited by the B.B.C. are *laboratory* and *indisputable*. Of the first the popular pronunciation is *labóratory* and this is favoured by the B.B.C., if only to distinguish it from *lavatory*. But the *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers* are uncompromising with *láboratory*, which Fowler calls, for some inexplicable reason, the 'orthodox' pronunciation. *Indisputable* is quoted by the pamphlet as an example of the tendency to put the stress on the original root syllable—*indispútable* rather than *indtísputable*. Both pronunciations are given in *S.O.E.D.* A similar tendency to throw the accent forward is seen in the popular pronunciations *despticable* and *appplicable*, though neither of these is recognised by the B.B.C.

Shakespeare affords abundant examples of the older accentuation alluded to by Fowler. Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar* has about nine pages of them, of which the following quite familiar examples are representative:

Than in a nuncio of more grave aspect  
(*Twelfth Night*)

Your Grace hath ta'en great pains to qualify  
His rigorous course; but since he stands obdúrate  
(*Merchant of Venice*)

That thou, dead corse, again in cômplete steel  
 Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon  
 (*Hamlet*)

That rhéumatic diseases do abound  
 (*Midsummer Night's Dream*)

It stands as an edict in destiny  
 (*Midsummer Night's Dream*)

His means of death, his óbscure funeral  
 (*Hamlet*)

One or two other instances are given in the notes to individual words later in the chapter.

It is important to remember that variation of stress in a single word, according to grammatical function or meaning, is an important element in Modern English. We get, in effect, a number of very useful doublets. To take a very simple example: *desert*, the verb, is stressed on the second syllable, but *desert* the noun, ('a deserted place'), on the first. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) gives a list of some forty of them in which the differentiation is established. Representative examples are: *cónduct* (noun)—*con dúct* (verb), *éssay* (noun)—*essáy* (verb), *próduce* (noun)—*pro dúce* (verb), *éxtract* (noun)—*extráct* (verb). In many others the 'accent-shifting is tentative only'. No rule can be given for them, though on the whole it would seem reasonable to vary the stress whenever possible since, as Fowler says, 'differentiation is in itself an aid to lucidity'. A similar differentiation by stress is made, less often, between noun and adjective, examples of which are *expért* (adjective)—*éxpert* (noun), *inválid* (adjective)—*invalid* (noun), *instínct* (adjective)—*instinct* (noun) and *minúte* (adjective)—*minute* (noun), with the further corruption of the unstressed syllable into *-it*. Again there are several doubtful examples. These, as well as noun-verb differentiations not yet completely established, are dealt with later, in connexion with the recommendations of the B.B.C.

Another type of differentiation is that in which a consonant

sound at the end of a word is modified—‘hard’ in the noun and ‘soft’ in the verb—without any change of spelling. Representative examples are *use, excuse, grease, house, mouse, mouth*. Often, however, such variation is reflected in spelling, as in *bath—bathe, grass—graze, safe—save, breath—breathe, strife—strive, advice—advise*. The last pair reminds us that the differentiation is made in spelling, but not in pronunciation, in *practice—practise*. In *prophecy—prophesy* the sound of the last vowel points the difference. Fowler instances the soldier’s *leaf* for *leave* as a possible ‘instinctive application of this principle’, providing ‘a rare specimen still in the making to set beside the fully developed ones’.

It is interesting to consider one or two other problems of stress suggested by the B.B.C. recommendations. *Broadcast English* (1928—second edition 1931) was prepared by a Committee consisting of Robert Bridges, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Professor Daniel Jones, Mr. A. Lloyd James, Mr. George Bernard Shaw, Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith, Professor Lascelles Abercrombie and Dr. C. T. Onions. Clearly then, it was a peculiarly representative and competent ‘Brains Trust’ for answering questions on a difficult and ticklish subject, the pronunciation of English; and its decisions must be treated with respect. It must be remembered, however, that the recommendations were made only for the convenience and guidance of the B.B.C. announcers. ‘The B.B.C’, says the pamphlet, ‘has no desire to accept or dictate any standard of pronunciation other than the current usage of educated speakers’. Nevertheless, it is obvious that ‘announcers’ English’ must have a marked effect on the general speech of the listeners, sometimes supplying a healthy corrective to popular mispronunciations, and sometimes, it must be confessed, proving that even the highest authority cannot fly in the face of common usage and prejudice. In this connexion it may be noted that between 1928 and 1931 the Committee bowed to public opinion on the pronunciation of a few words; these are dealt with later in the chapter.

The following are selected words in which, for ordinary

speakers, the incidence of the stress is doubtful. For each word the B.B.C. (1931) recommendation is quoted first, followed by comments on popular usage, and, where it is of interest, the recommendations of *S.O.E.D.*, *Chambers* (1943) and Fowler (*M.E.U.*):

*acumen*: akéwmén; so also *S.O.E.D.*, but accentuation on the first syllable is quite common.

*adult* (noun): áddult; so also *Chambers*. The *S.O.E.D.* does not commit itself; many speakers throw the accent forward on to the second syllable, as in the adjective (*adúlt*). Since nothing is gained by differentiation the variation of accent according to grammatical function seems pointless.

*ally* (noun and verb): allý. The accentuation in the verb is standard; but for the noun *á*lly is common, and is recognised in *Chambers*. The B.B.C. recommends 'állied forces'.

*aspirant*: aspírant; so also *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers*, though both recognise *áspirant*, which is in quite common use.

*balcony*: bálcony. This is the accepted accentuation to-day, but up to the early nineteenth century the word was pronounced *balcóny*. *S.O.E.D.* says there is one example of the modern pronunciation in Swift.

*capitalist*: cápitalist. No authorities recognise the modern tendency to throw the accent on to the second syllable.

*centenary*: senté<sup>́</sup>nary. The *S.O.E.D.* recognises only *céntenary*, and stigmatises the B.B.C. recommendation as erroneous.

*chagrin* (noun): shágrin. Fowler and the dictionaries say 'shagrén', bringing the pronunciation into line with that of the concrete variant *shagreen*, rough skin.

*chastisement*: chástisement. The B.B.C. says that 'the pronunciation having the stress on the second syllable (with a long *i*) is obsolescent', but it is by no means obsolete. The recommended pronunciation, however, is at least as old as Shakespeare:

And chástisement doth therefore hide his head.

*cinema*: síninema. So, too, the *S.O.E.D. Chambers* spells the word, Greek fashion, *kinema(tograph)*. There is a modern tendency to say *kinéma*, especially among those who are conscious of the Greek origin of the word.

*clandestine*: clan-déss-tin. All authorities are with the B.B.C., but *clándeštine* (with a long *i*) is frequently heard.

*clematis*: clémmatis. Fowler, *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers* agree, on the plea that the word is adopted direct from Greek, and must therefore keep the Greek quantity. But popular prejudice runs in favour of *clemmáytis*.

*consols*: consóls. This stress remembers the origin ('consolidated annuities') and distinguishes the word, in speech, from *cónsul*.

*controversy*: cóntrovèrsy. So also the dictionaries. But *contróversy* is a long time dying.

*contumely*: contéwmly. Fowler says there are no fewer than five pronunciations of this word (*kóntumli*, *kóntuméli*, *kóntumili*, *kontúmili*, *kontúmli*), and recommends the first on the strength of the familiar line in *Hamlet*:

The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's cóntumely.

The *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers* both give the third, though it is rarely used, and is (as Fowler says) less likely to survive than any of the others, since 'a stressed syllable



followed by three unstressed ones is very unpopular except with professors and the like if there is an alternative handy'. The best alternative seems to be, not Fowler's, but the B.B.C.'s.

*decade*: dékkad. So *S.O.E.D.*, but *Chambers* gives a long *a* in the second syllable, which is far commoner in ordinary speech.

*decadence*: déccadence.<sup>1</sup> This pronunciation has gained ground in recent years. *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers* give the alternative with the accent on the second syllable and a long *a*, which was advocated by the B.B.C. in the 1928 edition of the pamphlet.

*disciplinary*: díssiplinnary. This is an accentuation that would be beyond anybody but an announcer. It is suited, says Fowler drily, 'only for academic articulation'. Ordinary folk will continue to put the stress on the third syllable, with a long *i*, in spite of the example of *discipline*.

*doctrinal*: doctrýnal. Fowler, rather perversely, setting up the argument of False Quantity, recommends *dóctrinal*. *S.O.E.D.* and *Chambers* give the B.B.C. stressing only as an alternative. But *doctrýnal* is likely to hold its own.

*environs*: envýrons. The alternative *énvions*, recognised by the dictionaries, has little to recommend it, especially as the verb and the abstract noun (*environment*) are both stressed on the second syllable, with the *i* long.

*fantasia*: 'fantazéca'. *Chambers* gives only 'fantásia'—the second *a*, being the sound in 'ah'.

*formidable*: fórmidable. All authorities are against the stress on the second syllable, though it is quite common in ordinary speech.

<sup>1</sup> The B.B.C. phonetic system seems to break down here. If *dekkad* why not *dekkadence*?

*irrefutable*: irréfutable. Fowler also advises this against *S.O.E.D.*, which placed the stress on the third syllable (giving the other as an alternative). But if *indisputable* (see page 140) why not *irrefutable*?

*perfect*: pèrfect (adjective), perfèct (verb). But this distinction, though it is maintained in the dictionaries, is by no means popular in current speech. It has no history behind it. Charles Wesley (eighteenth century) writes:

And pèrfect holiness in me,

in one of his familiar hymns, and many poets before and since have used the same accentuation.

*precedence*: preséedence. The B.B.C. further recommends 'préssedent' for *precedent* as a noun, and 'preséedent' for *precedent* as an adjective. Fowler rightly says that these pronunciations, which are favoured by the *Oxford Dictionary*, do not conform to current usage; and he advocates putting the stress on the first syllable for all alike.

*quandary*: kwondáiry. Fowler admits the force of what he calls 'recessive accent' in throwing the stress back on to the first syllable in current speech—'kwóndary'.

*record*: récord (noun), recórd (verb). This distinction is now established; but older English had *recórd* for the noun:

Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond recórds.

(*Hamlet*, i. 5)

*révenue*. This accentuation is now established; but *révenue* was common in earlier speech. Shakespeare has:

I have a widow aunt, a dowager  
Of great révenue, and she hath no child.

(*Midsummer Night's Dream*, i. 1)

*sonorous*: sonórous. The B.B.C. and Fowler are both dogmatic about this stressing, and *Chambers* follows suit, in addition making the first *o* long. Certainly Milton's famous line:

Sonórous metal blowing martial sounds,

supports the argument. All the same, most people to-day stress the first syllable, and they have the mild support of *S.O.E.D.*, which gives this accentuation as an alternative.

*subsidence*: subsýdence. Here the B.B.C. follows the *Oxford Dictionary*, but Fowler cogently argues for putting the stress on the first syllable, and instances in support *residence, confidence, providence*.

*vagary*: vagáiry. Fowler, the *Oxford Dictionary* and *Chambers* support, but *S.O.E.D.* gives the alternative *vágary* which is at least as common in current speech.

*viola*: viðla (musical instrument), výola (flower). A useful distinction.

Among the pronunciations on which the B.B.C. altered its mind between 1928 and 1931 were those of words ending in *-ile*—*fragile, profile, futile, facile*. It originally followed the *Oxford Dictionary* pronouncement that the *i* in the second syllable is short; but the B.B.C. has wisely come into line with modern usage, declaring that 'these and similar adjectives in *-ile* may very well be encouraged to settle down to a uniform pronunciation in *'-yle*'. The Committee restores *eyedill* (*idyll*) for its original and unpopular *iddill*, and replaces 'eye-o-dyne' by 'eye-o-deen' for *iodine*. Its tendency to the anglicisation of foreign borrowings is illustrated in its treatment of *garage*. The 1928 pamphlet recommended the French ('zh') sound as in *barrage, persiflage*, for the second *g*; but the 1931 edition advocates *garredge*, to rhyme with *carriage*. Such

anglicisation appears in other words, and usually runs against current usage. 'Fotill' for *fauteuil*, for example, is a pronunciation never heard outside a B.B.C. studio, if even there; 'fewziledge' (*fuselage*) still keeps its French 'zh' sound in modern speech; most speakers prefer 'tray' and 'valay' to 'trayt' and 'vallet'; and *ski* remains 'shee' to most of those who have reason to use the word. The truth is that anglicisation of foreign borrowings (see also page 27 ff.) develops spontaneously like any other process of the language; even broadcasting has little power to hasten it, though it may, by example, direct and point the way.

A word remains to be said about one or two other recommendations of the pamphlet. The Committee is dogmatic about the pronunciation of *ate* ('rhymes with *bet*, not with *bait*') and *says* ('sez'), though pronunciations which follow the spelling are quite frequent in standard speech. It establishes the soft *c* (*s*) as the initial sound in *Celtic*, with which both Fowler and the *Oxford Dictionary* agree; but *Chambers*, which gives the hard sound *k* as the standard pronunciation, is more in accordance with custom.

*Route* raises an interesting question. The B.B.C. unhesitatingly says 'root'; as does *Chambers*; but both Fowler and *S.O.E.D.* admit, and apparently bless, the military pronunciation 'rowt' in 'route march' and 'column of route'.

A few other words which are apt to raise doubts in the minds of most of us are given below, with the B.B.C. recommendation in its own phonetic transcript.

<i>anglice:</i>	anglissy
<i>dynast:</i>	dinnast
<i>eyrie:</i>	stress on first syllable, which rhymes with <i>sigh</i> .
<i>fetish:</i>	feetish
<i>gibberish:</i>	<i>g</i> as in <i>go</i>
<i>gratis:</i>	graytis
<i>harem</i>	hairem
<i>housewifery:</i>	huzzifry

<i>inveigle:</i>	invaygle
<i>joust:</i>	jowst: <i>ow</i> as in <i>now</i>
<i>lichen:</i>	lyken
<i>missile:</i>	missyle
<i>nadir:</i>	naydear
<i>pace:</i>	(Latin, 'with deference to') rhymes with <i>racy</i> .
<i>patent:</i>	paytent, except in <i>Letters Patent</i> and <i>Patent Office</i> , which have <i>pattent</i> .
<i>philistine:</i>	fillistyne
<i>privacy:</i>	pryvacy
<i>provost:</i>	(a) civic and academic—provvost (b) military—provvo
<i>questionnaire:</i>	kwestionnair
<i>respite:</i>	respit
<i>ribald:</i>	ribbald
<i>tryst:</i>	vowel as in <i>rice</i>
<i>viands:</i>	vyands

## CHAPTER V

### GRAMMAR

Glamour *sb.* (Corrupt *f.* Grammer)—*S.O.E.D.*

#### I

It has been said that the English language has no grammar. Most schoolboys find that difficult to believe; and it is indeed, an exaggerated statement which nevertheless contains an element of truth. First of all, however, we must understand what we mean by grammar. It has two aspects, or divisions: *accidence*, that is, the 'accidents' which befall words, changes or 'inflexions' in their form, to denote their relationship to one another; and *syntax*, that is, the function of words and the principles which govern the construction of sentences. This part of grammar is outside the scope of this book; but *accidence* has a special historical interest, since the comparatively few inflexions that survive in English are of Anglo-Saxon origin. Anglo-Saxon was a highly-inflected language, like Latin. It had a full inflexional system in nouns, pronouns, adjectives and verbs, only the relics of which remain in Modern English. Words derived from other languages were affected, as they became naturalised, by such Anglo-Saxon inflexions as survived. How and why this loss of inflexion occurred in the language we may understand more clearly by studying in detail the various parts of speech.

Anglo-Saxon nouns, like those of Latin, were inflected not only for number but also for case, and were grouped in declensions that, in general, represent differences of grammatical gender—masculine, feminine, and neuter. It must be remembered at the outset that gender disappears from the language once inflexions, and therefore declensions, disappear. There is, therefore, no gender in Modern English nouns—except, strictly,

in one or two that have retained odd forms from an Anglo-Saxon declension other than the normal masculine. Nouns like *boy—girl*, *cock—hen*, *hero—heroine* have no grammatical gender; they are merely words related in meaning in that they denote differences of sex. In French, although nouns are not inflected in declensions, they retained a modified gender (masculine and feminine only) derived in the main from their Latin original; and that gender is kept alive because French adjectives, including the articles (*le, la; un, une*), do change their forms for gender, and so reflect, as it were, the gender of the nouns with which they agree.

## II

Most English nouns form their plural by adding *-s* to the singular. This is by far the most important noun-inflexion that survives. It represents the *-as* of the plural of the Anglo-Saxon masculine declension (*stan*, 'stone'; *stan-as*, 'stones'). Probably this inflexion was established partly because most French nouns also made their plural in *-s*, and with the mingling of Saxon words and French derivatives in the Middle Ages this characteristic method of forming the plural would naturally predominate. In medieval English the Saxon *-as* often became *-es*. Thus in the opening lines of the *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer writes 'shoures sote', 'the tendre croppes', 'sundry londes'; but sometimes the *e* was lost and the *s* was added directly to the singular form—*palmers*, *pilgrims*. In Modern English we add *-es* only in certain circumstances—for example, when a noun already ends with a sibilant or 'hissing sound' (*lass—lasses; fox—foxes*), or when it ends in *f* or *y* (see page 133).

But a few nouns kick over the traces, as it were. They are of special historical interest because they are relics of other Anglo-Saxon declensions; for some reason or other they did not follow the great majority in adopting the masculine *-s* ending. Some of them, all names of animals, belonged originally to the Anglo-Saxon neuter declension, which in many nouns had no inflexion for the plural. The commonest

are *sheep*, *deer* and *swine*, all of which still have the same form in the plural as in the singular. *Horse* originally belonged to this group, as we know from Chaucer, who writes:

His hors were gode, but he ne was nat gay.

One or two other nouns make their plural in *-en* or *-n*, which represents the *-an* of what was called the 'weak declension' in Anglo-Saxon. The only one in common use is *oxen*. But *shoon* ('shoes') occurs in older poetic language. We have it in the verse which Ophelia sings in *Hamlet*:

How shall I my true love know  
From another one?  
By his cockle hat and staff  
And his sandal shoon.

Chaucer, writing of Chanticleer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, says:

Ful azur were his legges and his toon,

but elsewhere in the poem he uses the modern plural ending *toos* ('toes'). *Children* has a plural in *-en* tacked on, by analogy, to an older plural of the Anglo-Saxon neuter declension, (*cildru*). This developed first as *childer*, a form which is still common in the Northern and Scottish dialects.

Perhaps the most interesting group of all consists of those which make their plural by vowel-change: *man—men*, *woman—women*, *goose—geese*, *tooth—teeth*, *mous—mice*, and a few others. These are what are known as 'i-mutation' plurals. In the Anglo-Saxon language before we have any written records of it, probably during the sixth century, certain vowels which are pronounced at the back of the mouth (*a*, *o*, *u*) were changed or 'mutated' by a following *i* or *j* into 'front' vowels (*e*, *i*, *y*). By the time of Anglo-Saxon as we know it this influential *i* or *j* had usually disappeared. From the evidence of other languages closely connected with Anglo-Saxon, we know, for example, that the original form of *men* must have been something like *mani*. Though the *i* no longer exists, we see the result of its work in the vowel *e* of *men*; and the same process



took place in the other similar plural forms. *Book* originally belonged to this group; its Anglo-Saxon singular was *boc* and its plural *bec*, which, according to other sound laws, would have developed into *beech* in Modern English. *Brethren* from *brother* has a mutated vowel and the *-en* ending of the weak declension; it is, therefore, a double plural, like *children*. It gets its mutated vowel *e*, however, not from the Anglo-Saxon plural, which was *broþer* or *broþru*, but from the dative singular *breþer*. The modern plural is, of course, formed regularly—*brothers*; but *brethren* is still in restricted and specialised use. *Cow* is another word which has a modern plural, *cows*, and also one formed by mutation, *kine*. This again is a double plural; the Saxon forms were *cu* (singular) and *cy* (plural), which survives in Northern and Scottish speech, *kye*.

This process of *i*-mutation is seen, by the way, in several other pairs of related words in English. Thus we have the noun *doom* and the verb *deem*, the adjectives *long* and *broad* with their corresponding nouns *length* and *breadth*, the past tense and past participle *told* with the present *tell*, the adjective *old* with its comparative *elder*. In each of these mutated forms the original *i*, as in the noun plurals, has been lost; only the changed vowel betrays its original presence.

There are a few other nouns which do not make their plural in *-s*. They are those which have been adopted in English from other languages and have retained their foreign spelling and inflexions. Thus from Latin (or Latin through Greek) we have *phenomenon*—*phenomena*, *dogma*—*dogmata*, *terminus*—*termini*, *formula*—*formulae*, *index*—*indices*, *basis*—*bases*, *hiatus*—*hiatus*; from French *bureau*—*bureaux*, *adieu*—*adieux*, *monsieur*—*messieurs* (generally in its English contracted form *messrs.*), *madame*—*mesdames*; from Italian *dilettante*—*dilettanti*; from Welsh *eisteddfod*—*eisteddfodau*. These are representative of their type; there are several others, especially of Latin-Greek origin. But there is to-day a strong tendency to the anglicisation of such plurals. Of the Latin-Greek group we may say, generally, that when they are used in a technical sense they retain their foreign plural, but that in ordinary usage they

adopt the English *-s*. Thus *formulae*, *indices*, *dogmata* are the scientific, *formulas*, *indexes*, *dogmas* the popular forms. Sometimes the two plurals represent a real differentiation in meaning: *genii* means 'spirits' ('The genii of the stream'), *geniuses* 'men possessed with a spirit' ('Such geniuses as Newton and Einstein'). It is probable that in a comparatively short time most of these strangers will become, as it were, members of the family. Fowler (*M.E.U.*) warmly advocates the abolition of the French plurals in *-x*, and of the Latin-Greek examples he says boldly that 'when one is really in doubt which to use the English form should be given the preference'.

In some words we have what may be called a 'false' plural which has given rise to a 'false' singular. One interesting example is the word *pea*, whose modern plural is *peas*. The original noun was *pease*, from the Anglo-Saxon feminine plural *pise*, used in a collective sense. This developed a new double plural in Middle English, *pesen*, on analogy with other plurals in *-en*. Then, by backward formation a new singular, *pea*, was made, late in the seventeenth century. We still keep the original word *pease* in the compound *pease-pudding*, and in the place-name Pease Pottage, a village on the Brighton Road. Other examples of similar backward formation are *cherry*, from the French *cerise*, and *riddle*, from the Anglo-Saxon *raedels*, the root of which is *read*.

*Riches* is a false plural, derived from the French *richesse*; so is *alms*, which is the Middle English *aelmesse* (see page 15). Both are used in Elizabethan English as singulars: Shakespeare has 'The riches of the ship is come on shore', and 'to ask an alms' occurs in the Authorised Version. The word *wage* (a doublet of *gage*—see page 50) is a legitimate etymological singular, but on the analogy of *riches* sometimes developed a singular sense in its plural form, as in the sentence (Authorised Version) 'The wages of sin is death'.

*Means*, originally from the Latin *medianus* through the French *moyen* has the singular form *mean* in the sense 'average'; but for all other senses it has the plural form and construction in Modern English. We find, however, 'by no mean'

and 'no mean of death' in Shakespeare. This word is notable, by the way, for its extraordinary range of meaning, both as noun and as adjective. Other examples of the same type are *pains*, in the phrases 'to take pains' and 'to be at pains', a modern idiom corresponding with the impersonal construction 'peyned him,' common in Chaucer (see page 13), *news*, *shambles*, *innings*, and *links*, all of which are usually treated as singulars.

There is one very interesting example of French origin. This is *assets*, which is derived from *assez* ('enough') and is therefore a singular. But in Modern English it is usually considered to be plural, and a new singular *asset* has been formed from it. Against this formation, and its popular use, Fowler protests vigorously. But the fact remains that the form and the use have established themselves. Such a sentence as 'He is an asset to his side' is now intelligible and, indeed, idiomatic English, containing a living metaphor from the vocabulary of finance; and any such synonyms as Fowler himself suggests (*possession*, *gain*, *advantage*, *resource*) are none of them suitable.

### III

The only other inflexion in English nouns is the *s* with an apostrophe, of the possessive case. This has an interesting history. It originates in the inflected form of the Anglo-Saxon possessive *-es* in the masculine and neuter declensions (*mannes*, *wordes*). The *-es* survives until the end of the Middle Ages. Chaucer has, for example, 'his lordes werre', 'his beddes heed', 'hertes suffisaunce'; Shakespeare uses it only occasionally, and then for the sake of rhythm:

Swifter than the moon's sphere.

When the *e* was lost by normal weakening the *s* was, of course, added directly to the singular stem, so that there was no distinction between the singular possessive and the nominative plural, except in those few nouns whose plural did not end in *-s*. The possessive is so written, without an apostrophe, up to the end of the seventeenth century. Shakespeare (First Folio)

has 'his Soueraignes life', 'your Fathers enemies'; Milton (see page 113) writes 'summers rose', Marvell 'Times winged chariot'. The strange possessive 'phrase' which we have in the English Prayer Book, 'for Jesus Christ *hjs* sake', and in other writers (including Shakespeare) is probably merely emphatic, though it may have arisen from a mistaken belief that the characteristic *-s* of the possessive was a contraction of *his*.

The Anglo-Saxon declensions other than the masculine and neuter had different inflexions for the possessive singular; but none of these have survived in Modern English—except *Lady* (for *Lady's*) Day. *Lady* ('*hlæfdige*') belonged to the Anglo-Saxon weak declension, with the possessive in *-an*, which was weakened to *e*, and finally lost. Chaucer's young Squire performed his feats of arms 'in hope to stonden in his *lady* grace'. Another survival in Chaucer of the same origin is *nonne*, in the title 'The Nonne Preestes Tale'. From a different Anglo-Saxon declension comes the form *fader* in the Host's exclamation towards the end of the Prologue:

Now, by my fader soule, that is deed.

In Saxon the word (*fæder*) was not inflected for the possessive though the form *fæd(e)res* developed quite early.

The history of the *-s* in the plural possessive depends on the fact that the old Saxon *-es* was adopted as the characteristic possessive sign in both singular and plural. So, in later English, up to the end of the seventeenth century, when the inflexion had weakened into *-s*, there was no distinction between the singular and plural possessive forms, except in those nouns whose plural did not end in *s*. Thus *hearts* may stand for the ordinary nominative plural, the possessive singular, and the possessive plural; but the distinction is clear in *men*, *mans* and *mens*. The introduction of the apostrophe after the *s* in those nouns whose nominative plural ends in *s* was an artificial device to point the difference. Where the plural noun did not end in *s*, the apostrophe was placed before the possessive *-s*, as in the singular (*men's*, *children's*). In actual fact, the possessive plural never ended in *-es* in Anglo-Saxon; its commonest

endings were *-a*, *-ra* and *-ena*. Of the *-ra* inflexion we have an example in Chaucer. He says the Host was 'oure *aller* cok' where *aller* represents the medieval development of the Saxon *ealra*, 'of all'. We shall see later (page 160) how the possessive and the dative plural inflexions survive in certain adverbs.

It is important to remember that the possessive inflexion ('s, s') is used with only a comparatively few nouns in Modern English. They are mainly the names of persons or animals, though a few others are to be found in stereotyped phrases like 'for pity's sake'. The possessive, like other case relationships (see below), is usually expressed by a preposition (*of*) plus a noun. There is also a comparatively modern construction in which a kind of double genitive is used for emphasis, as in 'That symphony of Beethoven's'. Fowler (*M.E.U.*—s.v. *of*) admits it only as a 'sturdy indefensible'; but it really belongs to the type of idiom represented by a double comparative or a double negative.

## IV

The history of pronouns is a little more complicated. Most of them were fully inflected, and many of the inflexions remain. The reason for this survival of declension is fairly obvious: if pronouns were, like nouns, almost indeclinable, confusion might easily arise over their relationship to the other words in the sentence, since a pronoun often has to reflect various functions of the noun it represents. As it is, one of the chief difficulties with pronouns of the third person is to make certain that they relate correctly to their appropriate nouns. We are startled by the sentence in the Authorised Version:

And when they arose in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses,

where *they* does a double duty, first for the Israelites and then for their unfortunate enemies, the Assyrians. Cobbett has a characteristically pungent chapter on this subject. A passage

from it is worth quoting, as much for its own forthright English as for its argument:

Never write a personal pronoun, without duly considering what *noun* it will, upon a reading of the sentence, be found to *relate* to. There must be a noun, expressed or understood, to which the pronoun clearly relates, or you will not write sense. 'The *land-holder* has been represented as a monster which must be hunted down, and the *fund-holder* as a still greater evil, and both have been described as rapacious creatures, who take from the people fifteenpence out of every quatern loaf. *They* have been told that Parliamentary Reform is no more than a half-measure, changing only one set of thieves for another; and that *they* must go to the land, as nothing short of that would avail *them*.' This is taken from the memorable report of a committee of the House of Lords, in 1817. Now, to what nouns do these pronouns relate? Who are the *subjects* in the first sentence? The *land-holder* and the *fund-holder*, to be sure, and, therefore, to them do the pronouns relate. These Lords mean, doubtless, that the people had been told, that the people must go to the land; that nothing else would avail the people; but, though they mean this, they do not say it; and this part of their report is as false in grammar as other parts of the report were in fact.

Our personal pronouns, *I* and *thou* (Anglo-Saxon *ic* and *þu*) retain the Saxon inflexions, with the normal changes in pronunciation and spelling. The genitive singular (*min*, *þin*) is not weakened in the modern true possessive pronoun ('That book is mine'), but the weakened form *my* has become the possessive adjective—'That is my book'. In Saxon *min* and *þin* were adjectival as well as pronominal, and were indeed fully declined like any other adjective (see page 175). In the possessive plural a somewhat strange development has occurred. The Saxon forms were *ure* and *eowre*, again both adjective and pronoun, from which are derived our adjectival possessives *our* and *your*. But the Saxon *ure* and *eowre* were also

fully declined like ordinary adjectives, and had as their masculine possessive form *ures* and *eowres*, which have given us our pronoun possessives *ours* and *yours*.

The Saxon nominative of the second person plural was *ge*, Modern English *ye*. That form has now been banished to archaic and poetical language, and *you*, from the Saxon accusative *eow*, has taken its place. The whole of the second person singular has suffered the same banishment; but in Shakespeare's time *thou*, like *tu* in Modern French, was the pronoun of familiar and intimate, as *you* was the pronoun of more formal speech. Sir Toby Belch, suggesting to Sir Andrew a convenient way of rousing Cesario's indignation, says, 'If thou thou'st him some thrice it shall not come amiss'; and the Modern French verb *tutoyer* ('to call a person *thou*') means 'to insult by over-familiar address'. It may be added that the Anglo-Saxon pronouns also had special declinable forms (*wit*, *git*) for what was known as the 'dual' number—'we two', 'you two'—but these have entirely disappeared.

v

With the singular third person demonstrative pronoun, gender enters the field—for the only time in Modern English. In Saxon this pronoun was fully declined in the masculine, feminine and neuter, and the distinctions for gender survive. Certain forms are interesting. The Saxon accusative was *hine* which was, however, very early replaced by the dative *him*. Perhaps *hine* survives in certain dialect forms like *'un* and *'en*. The Modern *she* is probably another form of the old feminine demonstrative pronoun *seo*. It developed, no doubt, because with the gradual obscuring of vowel sounds the Anglo-Saxon *heo* became confused with the masculine *he*. For the same reason the Saxon accusative *hie* gave way to the dative and possessive form *hiere*, Modern English *her*.

The neuter singular in Saxon was *hit*. We have already commented (page 116) on the loss of *h* in Modern English. Its possessive form was the same as that of the masculine, *his*, and this remained standard in English up to the time of

Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself occasionally uses *its* and once or twice a kind of intermediate accusative form *it* in the possessive sense, as in Gonzalo's description of the ideal state (*Tempest*, ii. 1):

Nature shall bring forth  
Of *it* own kind all foison, all abundance  
To feed my innocent people.

The same form is used once in the Authorised Version (Leviticus xxv. 5) 'that groweth of it own accord'—though modern editions have *its*. But on the whole *its* was not in general use until the middle of the seventeenth century.

The Saxon forms in the plural were, nominative and accusative *hie*, possessive *hiera*, dative *him*, with no distinction of gender. These have been replaced by pronouns derived from the Scandinavian—*they*, *them*, *their(s)*. As Jespersen says, this borrowing was doubly fortunate. The Scandinavian forms in *th* had some kinship with the other Saxon demonstratives (see page 161), and they also served to make the distinction clear between the plural of the third person pronoun and certain of its forms in the singular. Chaucer uses *they*, but he retains *hem* (the A.-S. dative *him*) as the accusative and *hir* in the possessive:

So priketh hem nature in hir corages.

Perhaps the modern contraction 'em (quite common in Shakespeare) is a survival of Chaucer's accusative.

The genitive *theirs* is on analogy with *ours* and *yours* (see above). All the personal pronoun possessives—*ours*, *yours*, *hers*, *its*, *theirs*—are peculiar in that, unlike nouns, they have no apostrophe in our modern spelling. The Authorised Version, however, even in modern editions has *your's* and *their's* ('for *their's* is the kingdom of heaven'); and Tennyson wrote:

Their's not to reason why,  
Their's but to do or die.



Indeed, the apostrophe now and then still 'gate-crashes' in these forms, even in the work of responsible writers.

Of the other demonstratives we have left only the two forms *this*, *that*, with their inflexions for numbers, *these*, *those*. In Saxon the two pronouns were fully inflected for case, and had distinctions for gender in the singular. Our modern singular forms are derived from the Saxon neuter *þis*, *þæt*. In the plural an odd thing has happened: *those*, our modern plural of *that*, is the Saxon *þas*, which was the plural of *this*; and *these* was a new formation in Middle English by the addition of an *-e* to the Saxon singulars *þes* or *þis*. Chaucer has the spelling *thise*. All other forms of the Saxon declensions have disappeared. The definite article *the*, however, derives from the old masculine nominative *se* ('that'), getting its *th* afterwards by analogy with the oblique forms of the pronoun, or with the Saxon indeclinable particle *þe*.

## VI

From the Saxon declension of the interrogative pronouns, *hwa?* (masculine and feminine) and *hwæt?* (neuter) we derive our modern *who?* and *what?* The old dative form *hwæm*, later *hwam*, has become our accusative *whom?* But the most interesting thing about this pronoun is that some of its forms were taken over, in late Middle English, to supply what Anglo-Saxon lacked—a separate relative pronoun that had also the force of a conjunction. In Modern English it has a 'personal' form in three cases *who*—*whom*—*whose*, and an 'impersonal' form (*which*—*which*—*whose*) derived from the Saxon interrogative *hwilc?* In modern colloquial speech the accusative *whom* as an interrogative is commonly 'weakened' into *who*; that is to say, it is assimilated to the nominative form. We say, though we do not write, 'Who did you see?' 'Who were you talking about?' This is an interesting modern example of that gradual loss of inflexion, first in speech and then in writing, which has been characteristic of the language since Saxon times.

## VII

The history of the development of the relative pronoun is interesting. We have three stages in Chaucer:

A good man was ther of religioun,  
 And was a povre persoun of a toun  
 A knight there was and that a worthy man  
 And smaller fowles that maken melodye.

In the first no pronoun is expressed after the conjunction; that is, the *and* is, as it were, both conjunctive and pronominal; in the second what would be in Modern English a relative is represented by *and* plus the demonstrative (*that*); and in the third the demonstrative *that* has the functions of the relative; that is, it is both pronoun and conjunction. Historically, the use of the demonstrative preceded the use of the interrogative as a relative pronoun; and *that* survives as a relative in Modern English. In Shakespeare *that* is a compound (demonstrative-relative) pronoun corresponding with the modern *what*:

All the conspirators save only he  
 Did *that* they did in honour of great Caesar.

Shakespeare also uses the relative *who* with this compound sense, that is, without an expressed antecedent:

*Who* steals my purse steals trash

and the usage survives, but only in poetic or literary language.

The use of the old interrogative *who?* *which?* *what?* as relatives had established itself a century before Shakespeare. There was at first no fixed differentiation between the personal and impersonal forms *who* and *which*, as we are reminded by the opening sentences of the Lord's Prayer in the Authorised Version. Up to quite recent times a pedantic objection was raised to the use of the possessive *whose* in impersonal senses;

'of which' was considered 'correct' English. We have, however, the example of so fastidious a poet as Gray:

On a rock whose haughty brow  
Frowns o'er old Conway's foaming flood;

though the purist might argue that here *rock* is personified. On the general question Fowler has an apt and witty note: 'In the starch that stiffens English style one of the most effective ingredients is the rule that *whose* shall refer only to persons; to ask a man to write flexible English, but forbid him *whose* "as a relative pronoun of the inanimate" is like sending a soldier on active service and insisting that his tunic collar shall be tight and high'.

One common usage in Shakespearian and Elizabethan language generally that has now dropped out altogether is the omission of the relative when it is subject of its clause. We omit it in oblique cases provided it is a 'defining' relative (see below): 'The man I saw last night'; 'The room you slept in faces east'. But Shakespeare writes:

I have a mind (which) presages me such thrift.

(*Merchant of Venice*)

I have a brother (who) is condemned to die.

(*Measure for Measure*)

The hate of those (who) love not the king.

(*Richard II*)

in each of which the relatives are omitted or 'understood'. The practice has lately returned in the syntax of some modern poets, following (mainly) Gerard Manley Hopkins, of whom Robert Bridges says that one of the chief causes of his obscurity 'is his habitual omission of the relative pronoun', and quotes as an example:

Squander the hell-rook ranks sally to molest him,

where an unexpressed *that* (or *which*) is subject to the verb *sally*. It may be remarked in passing that there is a general tendency among writers, especially poets, of to-day to dispense

with what Bridges calls 'purely constructional syllables', including prepositions and conjunctions. Probably it is merely a phase or fashion; if, however, it is anything more it may in time have an effect on the syntax of the language.

The accusative form *whom* is often given short shrift in colloquial speech, and even in writing, to-day probably because, both as a relative and as an interrogative, it usually precedes the verb or preposition that governs it. On the other hand it is apt to be used wrongly for the nominative (*who*) in such sentences as 'He was a politician whom, I suppose, could be trusted', where the parenthetic verb *suppose* attracts it into the accusative. In one construction, after the conjunction *than*, *whom* has become regularised in Modern English in defiance of the normal laws of grammar. Cobbett, a century and a half ago, would have none of it:

There is, however, an erroneous way of employing *whom* which I must point out to your particular attention, because it is so often seen in the works of very good writers, and because it is very deceiving. 'The Duke of Argyle, *than whom* no man was more hearty in the cause'. 'Cromwell, *than whom* no man was better skilled in artifice'. A hundred such phrases might be collected from the best authors, yet they are bad grammar. In all such cases, *who* should be made use of; for, it is nominative and not objective.

To-day, in such constructions *than who* is not English, because the custom of language, which is the mainspring of all grammar, has declared otherwise.

The term 'defining' relative, which has been used in this chapter, requires some explanation. A relative pronoun may introduce either a true adjective clause qualifying or 'defining' the antecedent, or a kind of co-ordinate clause related to the antecedent only in a parenthetic sense. We see the difference clearly in the two sentences 'The first speaker who really moved the crowd was Mr. Jones' and 'The first speaker, who really moved the crowd, was Mr. Jones'. It is clear that the relative in the first sentence is defining—the first (out of a

number of speakers) who moved', and the second 'non-defining'—'Mr. Jones was the first speaker, and he moved the crowd'. Normally, the differentiation is first and foremost a matter of punctuation; but there has been in comparatively recent times a tendency to restrict the impersonal *which* to the non-defining and *that* to the defining use; the personal form *who* having both functions. However, though Fowler gives this helpful differentiation his blessing, it is not yet by any means established in modern usage. But it is an interesting example of that striving after consistency and avoidance of ambiguity which is characteristic of the language to-day.

## VIII

The indefinite pronouns call for little comment. Saxon had three simple forms *hwa* ('someone'), *hwæper* ('one of two') and *hwilc* ('anyone'), to which the prefixes *a-*, *ge-*, and *æg-* could be added to give various shades or distinctions of meaning. One or two of our modern pronouns are directly derived from these compounds. Thus *æghwæper* has become, by way of an intermediate form, the modern *either*; and through the form *ohwæper*, the Saxon comparative *oper* ('other'). From the compounding of *a-* and the noun *wiht* ('wight' = creature) came the Saxon indefinite pronoun *awiht*, Modern English *aught*. Negatives could be made by the addition of an initial *n*; hence *neither* and *naught* (also *nought*, see page 102) in Modern English. The Saxon forms *hwilc*, *ealc*, and *swelc* have, by loss of *l* and other sound-changes, given us *which*, *each* and *such*.

The indefinite pronoun *one* was not used until very late Middle English, and then probably by the influence of the French *on*. Chaucer has *men* in the indefinite sense:

Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte,

where the singular verb (*smoot*), in apparent defiance of grammar, suggests a singular subject which is, however, in actual fact a plural noun. Even in Modern English *one* has not really established itself. 'One ought to do one's best', has a Frenchified air about it; on the whole, we prefer to dispense

with the word in favour of the personal pronouns *we*, *you*, used indefinitely—‘we ought to do our best’. Chaucer, as we have already seen, has such compounds as *everichoon*, and similar forms exist to-day—*anyone*, *everyone*, *someone*. The negative form *none* (Chaucer’s *noon*) is not, in modern use, a real indefinite pronoun, but a combination of *no* or *not* and the numeral *one*, implying ‘not one of many’. In the indefinite sense we use ‘no one’ (sometimes hyphenated) and the comparatively recent compound *nobody*. The usage exemplified in ‘None shall make you afraid’ (Authorised Version) is now archaic. It is noteworthy that those indefinite pronouns which have an inflected possessive differ from the personal pronouns in that, like nouns, they keep the apostrophe with the *s*—*one’s*, *other’s*, *everyone’s*.

## IX

In verbs, as in nouns or pronouns, many of the inflexions of Anglo-Saxon have been lost, partly through the natural ‘weakening’ which has played havoc with most of our grammatical suffixes, and partly by the force of analogy. In Saxon itself there were two main types of verbs: the *Weak*, which formed their past tense and past participle by the addition of a dental suffix (*ed*, *-d* or *-t*) to their present stem, and the *Strong*, which made their past forms by changes in their root vowel. Both types survive; but the weak conjugation has prevailed, becoming the standard pattern for all derivatives, and a few strong verbs remain as interesting relics of a primitive inflexional system.

Before we consider the differences between weak and strong verbs it will be convenient to trace briefly the history of one or two inflexions which they have in common. First, then, the infinitive. In Anglo-Saxon it had the suffix *-an*, or in some verbs *-ian*. This became the Middle English *-en*, which was often ‘weakened’ as *-e*. Chaucer has both these endings:

Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eek lekes,  
And for to *drinken* strong wyn, reed as blood.  
Then wolde he *speke*, and *crye* as he were wood.

From Modern English all trace of an inflexional suffix has disappeared. The 'to' form of the infinitive ('to love', 'to do'), which is its normal outward characteristic when it is not used in a compound tense, arose out of an Anglo-Saxon construction in which the preposition *to* governed the inflected dative form of the infinitive: 'to lufianne' ('love'), 'to drincanne'. This phrase was used adjectivally, as in our modern gerundial infinitive—'A house to let'. In Anglo-Saxon the present participle had the suffix *-ende* and was declined in full like an ordinary adjective. We have interesting survivals of the *-ende* suffix in the nouns *friend* and *fiend*, which are derived from the present participles of the Saxon verbs *freogan*—'love' and *feogan*—'hate'. But this characteristic ending gave way quite early in the Middle English period to the form *-ing(e)*, partly by corruption, and partly on analogy with existing verbal nouns in *-ung* or *-ing*, like *leorning* and *ræding*. In Modern English the present participle and the gerund (the 'verb-noun') invariably have the *-ing* suffix, without inflexion. The French present participle ending *-ant* became the Middle English *-aunt* in adjectives (*repentaunt*) and the *u* survived in spelling until quite late, but disappeared with a weakening of the stress on the final syllable (*repentant*). In Chaucer, such adjectives sometimes have the force of a participle:

' Me thinketh it *acordaunt* to resoun.

It is not difficult in Modern English to recognise the difference between a weak and a strong verb. Thus it is clear that in the past tense and past participle form *walked*, a suffix *-ed* has been added to the stem, without any change in the root vowel; but in the past tense *drove* and the past participle *driven* the vowel of the stem *drive* has changed, and the past participle has the inflexional suffix *-en*, not *-ed*. Such changes of vowel were in primitive language the result of changes of stress, just as we get variations of the quality of the vowels in *photograph*, *photographer*, and *photographic*. In Anglo-Saxon the strong verbs were divided into seven groups according to the 'gradation' or sequence of changes in the root vowels. But in the

surviving strong verbs many of these changes have been 'ironed out', as it were; in particular the vowel of the past tense and the past participle are now often identical, though they were once different. The *-en* ending of past participle often survives (*eaten, spoken*), but is sometimes lost (*sung*). In Chaucer the past participle of a strong verb ends either in *-en* or in the weakened form *-e*. He often has *-e* where Modern English has *-(e)n*, as in

The cause y-knowe, and of his harm the rote  
and

His berd was *shave* as ny as ever he can.

Similarly, he has *be* for *been*, and *see* for *seen*.

Indeed, such weakened forms of the strong past participles are common, not only in Shakespeare, but also in many eighteenth-century writers, who give us such sentences as 'The canal is froze' and 'English is spoke'. What is more, the past tense form was frequently used for the past participle—'He has never gave me'. John Wesley, who characteristically wrote an English Grammar, went so far as to recommend such forms in preference to those of the participles themselves. Nor must we forget that the original title of Gray's *Elegy* was 'Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard'. Mr. J. H. Whiteley in an admirable though sometimes misleading chapter on eighteenth-century language in his *Wesley's England* (to which I am much indebted here and elsewhere in this book) quotes a skit on Wesley's Grammar by John Byrom, one of the pioneers of modern methods of shorthand, and the author of the familiar hymn 'Christians awake! salute the happy morn':

Till just of late, good English has thought fit  
To call me written, or to call me writ;  
But what is writ or written, by the vote  
Of writers, now hereafter, must be wrote;  
And what is spoken, too, hereafter spoke,  
And measures never to be broken, broke.



I never could be driven, but in spite  
 Of Grammar, they have drove me from my right.  
 None could have risen, to become my foes;  
 But what a world of enemies have rose.  
 Who have not gone, but they have went about,  
 And torn as I have been, have tore me out.

We have modern examples of such usages in our phrase 'bespoke tailor' and the colloquialism, 'stony broke', as well as in the adverb *ago*, which is the weakened form of *agone*.

Many verbs which were once strong have become weak. Chaucer gives us one or two interesting examples:

But sore *weep* she if oon of hem were deed  
 He *sleep* namore than doth a nightingale.  
 Curteys he was, lowly, and servisable  
 And *carf* biforn his fader at the table.

In Modern English the corresponding forms would be weak, *wept*, *slept*, *carved*. The apparent change of vowel in *wept* and *slept* is due only to 'shortening' before a double consonant. On the other hand *wear*, which was originally weak, has become strong, on analogy with *tear* and *bear*. Chaucer has:

A whyt cote and a blew hood *wered* he.

So *dig*, which is always strong in Modern English, has the weak past participle and past tense in the Authorised Version:

... and wells *digged*, which thou *diggedst* not.

A few survivals are of special interest. The Authorised Version has the strong forms *holp* and *holpen*, of *help*, which has since become weak, as in the Magnificat 'He hath holpen his people Israel'. In modern usage *shave* is normally a weak verb, but its strong past participle is still sometimes used—'unshaven on parade'. *Swell* has a weak past tense (*swelled*) but a strong past participle (*swollen*), except in the phrase 'swelled head'. Other strong forms that survive in poetic or

deliberately archaic language are *dove* as the past tense of *dive*, and *clomb* as the past tense of *climb*:

Till clomb above the eastern bar  
The hornèd moon, with one bright star  
Within the nether tip.

There were in Anglo-Saxon several related pairs, a strong intransitive and a corresponding weak transitive verb. Some of these exist in Modern English, notably *rise—raise* and *lie—lay*. The Saxon *hon* ('hang') strong intransitive, and *hangian*, weak transitive, have become merged in the modern *hang*, which is both intransitive and transitive and remains strong, except in the special use of *hanged* for the execution of capital punishment. The confusion in Modern English of the various forms *wake*, *waken*, *awake*, *awaken*, *awoke*, *woke*, *waked* (see *M.E.U.* s.v. *awaken*) arises because there were at least two differentiated verbs in Anglo-Saxon, one weak and the other strong. *Cleave*, 'to cut' and *cleave*, 'to stick fast', are of separate origins. The first is from the Saxon strong verb *cleofan*; it is now usually weak, though the strong forms *clove*, *clave* and *cloven* (hoof, tongues) are found in archaic English. The second is from the two Saxon verbs *clifan* (strong) and *clifian* (weak). In Modern English the weak forms have prevailed, except in the one phrase 'His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth', which has its origin in the Bible.

Weak verbs sometimes have a change of vowel in the past, for two reasons. A long vowel before a single consonant is shortened before the double consonant arising from the addition of the dental *t* suffix, as in *keep—kept* and *deal—dealt*. Others owe their vowel change to *i*-mutation (see page 153). A typical example is *tell—told*. Here the original vowel of the verb was *o*, which was mutated to *e* in the present forms where the stem was followed by an *i*, now lost. But the *o* remains in the past forms because the dental ending was added directly to the stem, without any intermediate *i*. There were about twenty verbs of this type in Anglo-Saxon, the most important survivors in Modern English being *sell—sold*, *buy—bought*,

*teach—taught, seek—sought, think—thought. Reach* belonged to this group; its old past, now replaced by *reached*, is used by Chaucer:

Ful semely after her mete she raughte

and Shakespeare:

raught me his hand.

All the others have come into line with normal weak verbs—that is, they add *-ed* directly to their present stem. *Wrought* with metathesis of *r* (see page 119), is a survival of the old past form of *work*. It is archaic as a verb ('He wrought a great victory'), but the participle has become a simple adjective, as in 'wrought iron', 'overwrought'.

Another interesting group of verbs in Anglo-Saxon consisted of those whose present was an old strong past tense, from which new past tenses were built up on the weak model. The two most familiar survivors in Modern English are *can* (A.-S. *can*)—*could* (where the *l* is intrusive—see page 125) and *shall* (A.-S. *sceal*)—*should*. Chaucer sometimes uses *can* as a past tense:

Everich, for the wisdom that he can

Was shaply for to ben an aldorman.

*May* and *must* have undergone a peculiar transformation since the Saxon period. *May* originally meant 'can', 'be able', with a past form *might*—a meaning which is retained in *might*, the noun. *Moste* ('must') was the past tense corresponding with the present *mot*, meaning 'may', which has not survived. The modern meanings have developed owing, perhaps, to the quasi-auxiliary use of these two verbs. *Owe* is another of these 'past-presents' or 'strong-weak' verbs as they are sometimes called. It originally meant 'possess' (see page 64) and is so used in Shakespeare:

Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest.

But it has undergone a violent change of meaning, and has

taken the past form of normal weak verbs—owed. Its old past *ahle* (Modern English 'ought') has become a new verb with only one tense, and a differentiated meaning. A parallel verb *agan* existed in Anglo-Saxon, but dropped out in favour of *owe*, and was only revived in the seventeenth century as *own*, with the original sense of 'possess'.

## X

Other interesting verbs are *be*, *go* and *will*. The verb *to be* has forms which are derived from three distinct and separate roots, represented by *is*, *be* and *was*. In Anglo-Saxon it had two infinitives *beon* and *wesan*, but no past participle. Middle English, however, has the past participle *been*, which, as we have already seen, is often in Chaucer contracted to *be*:

At many a noble aryve had he *be*.

The Anglo-Saxon verb *gan* ('to go') made its past tense, but not its past participle, from a different root, *eode*. This form, with the common Saxon prefix *ge* (*ge-eode*), became *yeed* in Chaucer and Spenser. But in Modern English the past tense is borrowed from another verb *wendan*, 'to turn', which we still use in the phrase 'wend one's way'. *Will* has the past form *would*, now used only as an auxiliary; as a verb of full meaning ('desire') it has the normal weak verb suffix, *willed*.

Modern English is extraordinarily rich in verb tenses owing to the gradual development of 'tense phrases', made up of an auxiliary plus an infinite part of the verb, to express various shades of meaning. In Anglo-Saxon there were only two real tenses, the Present and the Past; but phrases in which *have*, *be*, *shall* and *will* became semi- or quasi-auxiliaries soon came into use. Thus *have* was first of all used only with the past participles of transitive verbs, and in the phrase thus formed the 'auxiliary' *have* governed the object and the participle acted as an adjective: 'I have done it' arises out of the original construction 'I have (i.e. 'possess') it done'. Later, however, *have* lost its individual meaning and became a real auxiliary, the object being governed by the new compound tense ('have

done") of the verb. Then, by a natural process, the construction was extended to intransitive verbs, though with these the alternative auxiliary *be* was originally used ('He is gone'), where the participle is a complementary adjective. Similarly, the present participle was complementary in what we now call the 'continuous' tenses—'I am, was going'. Two verbs *shall*, with an original sense of compulsion, and *will* ('desire') made up, with the infinitive, the phrases which have become our simple future. We have also an emphatic form of the Present and Past Definitive, made up of the auxiliary *do* and the infinitive—'I do understand', 'I did go'. An earlier form of this emphasising auxiliary was *gan*, the past participle of the old verb *ginnan*, 'to begin'. This was afterwards corrupted into *can*; we have it, for example, in one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

Then *can* I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,  
For precious friends hid in Death's dateless night.

## XI

Inflexion for person in the tenses has been reduced to a minimum in Modern English. The only inflexions remaining are the *-(e)s* of the second person and the *-s* of the third person singular present. In Anglo-Saxon the inflexion for the third person present was *-eth*, which survives only in archaic (for instance, Biblical) and poetic language. The Saxon subjunctive tenses, which had real syntactical significance and function, had different inflexions. Only one of them is represented in Modern English—the third person singular present, which originally ended in *-e*. This *e* has now disappeared, so that we have a form without inflexion—'If he *go*', 'God *save* the king!' 'though he *slay* me'. The most important survival is *were*, the past subjunctive in all three persons of the verb *to be* since this is the only true subjunctive form which is at all common in modern usage. It occurs not only where *to be* is a verb of full meaning ('If I were you') but also where it is an auxiliary ('If he were speaking').

Our modern imperative does not inflect for number, since

we have a second person pronoun (*you*) which is common to both numbers. But it is noteworthy that it is the singular, not the plural, form of the Saxon imperative that has come down to us. The original plural inflexion was *-eth*. Chaucer uses the singular and plural forms indiscriminately:

*Hold* up youre hond, withouten more speche

cries the Host to the pilgrims, where *hold* is the original singular, and our modern form. But he also uses the plural (*-eth*) form both when speaking to a single pilgrim

‘Sire knight’, quod he, ‘my maister and my lord,  
Now *draweth* cut, for that is myn accord’,

and when addressing the whole company:

‘Lordings, *herkneth* if you leste’.

The present and past participles of verbs, except when they are used in the composition of tenses, have adjectival force. They were often, and still sometimes are, used in the absolute construction<sup>1</sup> as in the phrases ‘all things considered’ and (now confined to legal and archaic language) ‘these objections notwithstanding’. Some of them, by a graduation from the absolute, have become prepositions and conjunctions. Thus ‘these objections notwithstanding’ is commonly expressed in Modern English ‘notwithstanding these objections’—that is to say, the participle *notwithstanding* governs the noun as a preposition instead of qualifying it as an adjective. Similarly, the absolute phrase ‘life during’, a direct translation of the

<sup>1</sup> Where the noun and its qualifying participle are in a phrase by themselves, grammatically free or ‘absolute’ (= unloosed) from the rest of the sentence. Thus if I write, ‘The game being over, we went home’, the participle *being* qualifies the noun *game* in its own phrase, and the phrase is absolute. But if I write, ‘Having finished the game, we went home’, the participle *having finished* qualifies the pronoun *we* in the main sentence; so the phrase is not absolute, but is tied to the sentence itself.

Latin ablative absolute *vita durante* was used in early English where we now write 'during life'—*during* here being a preposition governing *life*. We have a similar, though not quite parallel, example in the word *except*, which is derived directly from the Latin past participle *exceptus*, and is now used as a preposition—'Everybody voted, except me', where the corresponding absolute construction, with the normal past participle, would be 'Everybody voted, I excepted'. This was a very early use, as was the use (now archaic) of *except* as a conjunction: 'For the Pharisees, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of their elders' (A.V.). Sometimes the absolute construction with the past participle remains side by side with a disguised absolute use of the present participle: 'everything considered' may be expressed as 'considering everything', where *considering* is really a qualifying adjective in the absolute phrase '(we) considering everything'.

## XII

But the loss of inflexion in Modern English is most apparent in the adjective. We have seen that, like Latin, Anglo-Saxon had a full declension of nouns, with divisions into three grammatical genders, Masculine, Feminine and Neuter. Adjectives were also, as in Latin, fully declined in three genders, and agreed with the nouns they qualified in number, gender and case. Thus in the Anglo-Saxon phrase 'on eallum þingum' ('in all things'), both the adjective, *eallum*, and the noun have the inflexional suffix *-um* of the dative plural. But in Modern English adjectives are indeclinable; therefore the question of agreement does not arise. Here English is different from French, in which adjectives inflect for, and agree with, the noun in number and gender. It is this surviving adjectival inflexion which keeps grammatical gender (Masculine and Feminine only) alive in French.

There is one notable exception, though it is not concerned with gender. The demonstrative adjective inflects for number in the same way as the demonstrative pronoun (*this—these*,

*that—those*), and agrees with its noun in number. We say ‘*this* book’ but ‘*these* books’, ‘*that* house’ but ‘*those* houses’. The possessive adjectives have, of course, different forms for singular and plural (*my—our*, *his—their*, etc.) but they exist, as it were, in their own right, and have no grammatical agreement with the noun: we say *my* books, *their* dog, *our* house, where in French the possessive adjectives would inflect for number and gender.

Our definite article *the* (see page 161) is indeclinable. The indefinite article *a* can be used only with a noun in the singular; but if we need a qualifying word in the plural we use *some*. *Some*, however, is not truly indefinite (like *des* in French); that is to say it is not the real plural equivalent of the singular *a*, but has a particularised meaning of its own. Strictly speaking there is no plural form of the indefinite article; the noun stands without qualification—‘*Pigs* might fly if they had wings’.

## XIII

With the disappearance of inflexion in nouns, except in the possessive, the prepositional phrase (*to, with, by*, etc. + noun) became the recognised method of expressing those relationships which had hitherto been expressed by case endings, as in Latin. Even, now, however, in certain constructions we have a relic of the true dative, though it has no special inflexional suffix. We have it in such sentences as ‘I gave *my brother* all the money I could spare’, where *brother* is the indirect object of the verb, not the object of a preposition in a phrase. Certain other idiomatic usages involve the use of an oblique case of the noun as an adverb of place or time, in imitation of the similar Latin use of the accusative. The Latin ‘*ire domum*’ is rendered literally ‘to go home’ in English, where the noun *home*, used adverbially, represents the Latin accusative *domum*. So in a sentence like ‘I waited ten minutes’, the English adverbial phrase (without a preposition) is a reflexion of the Latin accusative of extent of time. The idiomatic use of *home*, already noted, attained a metaphorical



significance as early as the sixteenth century. Shakespeare has it:

That trusted *home*

Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,

where *home* means 'completely', 'thoroughly', a sense which is also illustrated in such an expression as 'He drove the nail *home*'.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of English, the use of the noun as an adjective, arises from the 'telescoping', as it were, of an attributive phrase made up of preposition and noun. Thus 'the leg of a table' is more concisely expressed as 'the table leg'. The same idiom is exemplified in many true or hyphenated compounds like *bookcase*, *penknife*, *moonlight*, *bee-hive*, *rabbit-hutch*, and in the adjectival use of the gerund (see page 97)—'*writing*-desk', '*walking*-stick', '*swimming*-bath'. One or two minor puzzles arise in connexion with this usage. Why do we say *countryman* but *townsman*, where the *s* without the apostrophe represents the possessive? Why, although we can say 'summer's day' and 'winter's day', can we not say 'spring's day' and 'autumn's day'? Is the apostrophe in 'boys' school' and 'dogs' home' justified, seeing that there is no real sense of possession?

Such questions, in themselves trivial, remind us that here we are becoming involved in the subtleties of English idiom. We are more deeply involved when we ask ourselves whether we should use a noun as an adjective if in fact the corresponding true adjective is available. Some years ago Lord Dunsany in an article on this subject deplored and condemned the phrase 'the *England* team', as commonly used by journalists, on the ground that the existing adjective, *English*, would serve the purpose. But, the fact remains that the team which plays 'for England' may or may not be an 'English' team; and the attributive use of the noun would seem to be not only justifiable but expedient. We are certain of the difference between 'a *flower* vase' and 'a *floral* vase'; but only subtle judgment can distinguish between 'a *woman* worker' and 'a *female* worker', 'a *country* district' and 'a *rural* district', 'a *weather* report' and

'a meteorological report'. All we can say is that the experienced writer or speaker will make his choice according to context and circumstance.

It is obvious that this usage makes for economy of words, and provides us with a richness of idiom that almost becomes an embarrassment; and it is, moreover, an integral part of our syntax. Possibly in these days it has gone too far, under the influence of American journalism. But the usage is, after all, a 'live' one, and any extensions of it that do not affect the general character of the language, or cause ambiguity and confusion, are legitimate. It is, indeed, a modern example of that flexibility which has characterised English since the days of Shakespeare, who to any objectors would have exclaimed, 'But me no more buts!' He and other Elizabethan writers led the way in another idiom that has become characteristic of the language—the use of a noun or adjective as a verb. Typical examples in the plays are '*gentle* his condition' (*Henry V*), '*stocking*', i.e. putting in the stocks, his messenger (*Lear*) 'they have here *propertied* me' (*Twelfth Night*), 'that which should *safe* my going' (*Antony and Cleopatra*). Later poets have not hesitated to follow suit. Hundreds of such transfers have, indeed, become an integral part of our vocabulary and idiom, and new ones are continually being added to the language. To *garden*, to *pen* a letter, to *pot* a plant or a preserve, to *paper* a wall, to *book* an order, are familiar and long-established examples. In modern times many have developed by way of slang and colloquialism. We *motor*, *train* and *bus*; a cricketer *skies* a ball; a workman *clocks* in; an offender is *carpeted* or *gaoled*. Sometimes the voice of the purist is heard in the land; but again, as at other times, the custom of language triumphs.

#### XIV

Oddly enough, certain of the Anglo-Saxon adjectival inflexions survive in a few of our modern adverbs. The reason is that in the older language an inflected (usually the dative) form of the adjective or noun was used adverbially. The dative inflexion of the Masculine and Neuter declensions was *-e*, and

this became the commonest adverb ending in Middle English. We find it in Chaucer: 'Wel coude he sitte on hors, and *faire ryde*'; 'So *hote* he lovede'; 'or if men smoot it with a *yérde smerte*'. The final *e* is, as usual, lost in Modern English; but this old formation is represented to-day by those adverbs which are identical with their corresponding adjectives, like *hard* and *fast*.

Sometimes the possessive inflexion (*-es*) was used for the adverb. An interesting survival is *needs* ('needes') in the expression 'needs must'. The numeral adverbs *once*, *twice*, *thrice*, have the same origin. *Once* is, with a spelling variation, the normal genitive, *ones*, of the Saxon *on* ('one'). *Two* and *three* had, of course, a plural genitive in Anglo-Saxon (*twēgra*, *preora*); the modern *twice* and *thrice* are on analogy with *once*. Chaucer says of the knight that he was 'in listes *thries*'. Another interesting adverbial form was *hwiles*, the possessive of the noun *hwil* ('time'). This occurs frequently in Shakespeare as a conjunction, *whiles*, and from it we have the modern *whilst*, which owes its *t* to a confusion with the common superlative ending *-est*. One modern adverb, *seldom*, retains the old dative plural ending *-um*. It is the dative plural of another Saxon word for time, *seld*. A similar formation, which we have now lost, though it is common in Chaucer and occurs now and then in poetic language, is *whilom* ('at times', 'of old'). The adverbial *the* is formed from the locative or instrumental case (*pe*) of the demonstrative pronoun. We have it in such phrases as 'the more the merrier', 'so much the better', 'the more fool he'. *Thus* is also an adverb derived from the demonstrative pronoun, though its ultimate origin is obscure.

The modern characteristic adverb suffix *-ly* arises from the common adjectival ending in Anglo-Saxon, *-lic* ('like'). To this was added the ordinary dative inflexion *-e* for the adverb; and this termination *-lice* has the weakened form *-ly* in Modern English. We still have a number of adjectives in *-ly*, like *godly*, *manly*, *homely*, *cowardly*. These cannot be used as adverbs in Modern, though they were so used in older, English. Thus the Book of Common Prayer has 'that under him we

may be *godly* and quietly governed', and Chaucer's Sergeant at Law 'rood but *boomly* in a medlee cote'. A few such adjectives, however, formed from nouns of time (*hourly*, *daily*, *weekly*, *yearly*) are also adverbs.

## XV

Though adjectives, as we have seen, have no inflexion for number, gender or case in Modern English, they retain inflexion for degree, *-er* (A.-S. *-ra*) for the Comparative and *-est* (A.-S. *-ost*, *-est*) for the Superlative. There are a few interesting forms. Some Saxon adjectives added a suffix containing an *i* in the primitive language, which caused *i*-mutation (see page 152) of the root vowel. Only one example of this survives—*elder* and *eldest* as comparative and superlative of *old*, which have a particularised use distinct from that of the non-mutated analogical forms *old* and *oldest*. *Near* is an old comparative turned positive. Its corresponding superlative was the mutated *niehst*, which has given us *next*, a word that is now used absolutely except in odd phrases like '*next* ('nearest') of kin', and now and then in place-names, like *Wells-next-the-sea*. *Near*, the modern positive, has a new comparative *nearer*, and superlative *nearest*. The Saxon positive was *neah*, from which we derive *nigh*, with its analogical (though rare) inflexions for degree, *nigher* and *nighest*.

*Far* (A.-S. *feorr*) was one of the *i*-mutation group, with comparative *fierra* and superlative *fierrst*. Chaucer has the old comparative:

And therto hadde he riden (no man *ferre*),

but he also uses *ferther*:

Er that I *ferther* in this tale pacc.

In Modern English we have two forms of both the comparative and the superlative, *farther*—*farthest*, *further*—*furthest*. Probably the second pair represent degree inflexions of the old positive *forth*, or of *fore*, with the comparative suffix *-t(h)er* as in *after* (see below). *Farther* and *farthest* then developed by

analogy. The difference in use is not by any means defined in Modern English. *S.O.E.D.* says 'The form *farther* is now preferred as the comparative of *far*, while *further* is used where the notion of far is absent', but Fowler (*M.E.U.*) comments, 'This seems to be too strong a statement, or a statement of what might be a useful differentiation rather than of one actually developed or even developing'.

*Rather* is another comparative with an interesting history. There is no corresponding superlative, and the old positive *rath(e)*, which meant 'quick' or 'early', is now archaic. We have it in the name of the apple 'rathe-ripe', which is, however, often corrupted as 'rare-ripe'. It occurs, too, in Milton's *Lycidas*:

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies.

Some words which end in *-ther* or *-ter* retain a primitive comparative suffix *-ther*, though most of them have lost their comparative sense and developed into other parts of speech—that is, they are no longer adjectives and adverbs. Examples are *other*, *either*, *whether*, *after*, and possibly (see above) *further*. *Micel* ('much') had two comparative forms in Anglo-Saxon—*ma* and *mar*. This accounts for the Shakespearian *moe* in, for example:

But keep me company but two years moe,  
Thou shalt not know the sound of thine own tongue.

The comparative *more* and the superlative *most* are now used as modifying adverbs to make the degree inflexions of all adjectives which, by reason of length or other euphonic difficulties, cannot take the suffixes *-er*, *-est*: thus we say 'more/most-beautiful', not *beautifuller*, *beautifullest*. In older language, the suffixes were usual in all adjectives. Shakespeare has *perfectest*; and *violentest*; other writers have *ancientest* and *marvellousest*. They also modify for degree all adverbs except the few, like *hard*, *fast*, *long*, which (see page 179) have the same form as the corresponding adjectives.

A few adjectives in Anglo-Saxon had the suffix *-ma* for the

comparative and *-most* for the superlative. We have survivals of these terminations in the superlatives *utmost*, (which has two comparatives, *utter* and *outer*), *midmost*, *inmost*, and the comparative *former*, from *fore*, which has two superlative forms, *foremost* and *first*. Etymologically, this suffix would be *-mest* in Modern English; *-most* is an altered form, on analogy with the adjective and adverb *-most*.

Four adjectives retain their 'irregular' Anglo-Saxon comparison. We have already noted *micel* (above); the others are *good* (*better*, *best*), *evil* or *bad* (*worse*, *worst*) and *lytel* (*less*, *least*). A double comparative, *lesser*, developed from *less*, and is used in certain phrases like 'the lesser of two evils', and 'the lesser light' (A.V. Genesis i. 16.), which has taken on a metaphorical sense. Another adjective with two comparatives and superlatives is *late*, *later*, *latest* and *latter*, *last*.

One interesting syntactical point arises in connexion with degree. Up to the time of Shakespeare, and occasionally later, the double comparative and superlative were admissible for emphasis:

How much *more elder* art thou than thy looks

This was the most *unkindest* cut of all.

Like the emphatic double negative, which is very common in Chaucer and Shakespeare, this forceful mode of expression has been frowned out of Modern English. In many ways it is a pity, since such illogicalities give to language a gusto it can ill afford to lose. A mathematical insistence that two negatives make a positive and a grammatical assertion that what is apparently superfluous is necessarily wrong have, between them, deprived English of two valuable idioms.

# XVI

Adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions often have identical or closely related forms in Modern English. We have already seen (page 179) how *hwiles*, originally an adverb and still so used in dialect and in poetic language, is a conjunction (*whiles*)

in Shakespeare, and later became corrupted to *whilst*. Other words which exemplify the same process are *against* and *amongst*. Here we have the possessive ending (-*es*) added to an existing adverb or preposition, not to an adjective. In Modern English *among* and *amongst* are both normally prepositions, without any clear difference of meaning and use. *Again* is now an adverb, but was once also a preposition. Chaucer's knight fought 'ageyn another hethen in Turkye'. The modern preposition is *against*.

For a time *and* or its weakened form (*an*) was used as a synonym of the conditional conjunction *if* or *as if*. It is common in Shakespeare: 'I will roar you an 't were any nightingale', 'and thou wilt be friends be friends', 'a went away an it had been any Christom child'. It was often used in conjunction with *if* ('an if'). But after the early seventeenth century *if* remained in possession of the field. Some prepositional or conjunctive pairs have, however, remained. We have already noted *among* and *amongst*; others are *though* and *although*, *on* and *upon*, *while* and *whilst*, *amid* and *amidst*, *until* and *till*. Of these Fowler (*M.E.U.*) says 'It is remarkable that by this time one of the forms should not have driven out the other', and adds that 'their survival may be due to the unconscious desire for euphony and ease'. One 'doublet' form that had a brief life, mainly in Shakespeare, was the French importation *sans* for *without*. The famous line in *As You Like It*, 'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' has kept it alive as a curious literary relic.

*Without* itself is an interesting word. In Modern English it is normally a preposition, with the sense 'lacking'. But in older English it could be both a preposition and an adverb meaning 'outside': 'a mile without the town'. It was also used as a conjunction, but it has lost this function in Modern English, being replaced by *unless*.

It is noteworthy that *and* (A.-S. *ond*) was once a preposition, with the sense 'against'. We have a survival of this use in the word *answer* (see page 103), Anglo-Saxon *ondswerian* 'to swear against'. Similarly *but* was, and in fact still

is, a preposition, meaning 'except'. It was originally a compound *by-out* (A.-S. *bi-utan*). As conjunctions both words have a suggestion of their prepositional force. With them may be compared the conjunction *than*, originally *then* (see page 127). The primitive construction was 'Tom is big, *then* John', that is, 'Tom is bigger *than* John'. From the Anglo-Saxon *eall-swa* we have two words, one normally an adverb, *also*, and the other both adverb and conjunction, *as* (see page 102).

The rather puzzling word *like* is an adjective. In Shakespeare, though not in Modern English, it has sometimes a superlative form, *likest*:

And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.

In Modern English the preposition (*to*) following it is usually omitted, so that *like* itself seems to have prepositional force. *Like* is not a conjunction in Modern English, though it is commonly so used in American; the corresponding conjunction is *as*. Older English often had 'like as': 'Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore'. A similar ellipsis occurs with the adjective (or adverb) *near* and the adjective *opposite*—'The church is *near/opposite* my house'.

*Since*, which is adverb, conjunction and preposition, is of doubtful origin. Probably it is a disguised adverbial possessive form in *-es*, like *once* (see page 179), derived from the Saxon *sippan*, 'after that'. *Sippan* with the addition *-es* became *sithence* in archaic, and by contraction, *since* in Modern English. An older, and now archaic, contraction was *sith*, which is common in Shakespeare. Another possible origin is the Saxon *sin*, still sometimes used in dialect, with the addition of an intrusive *s*.

Certain adverbs are derived from the *th-* stem of demonstrative pronouns—*there*, *then* and *thither* are the most important. The corresponding conjunctions *where*, *when*, *whither*, have their origin in the interrogative stems. *Why* is the instrumental case (A.-S. *hwȳ*) of the interrogative *hwæt?*



Chaucer uses the uninflected form: 'What (i.e. why) shold he studie and make himselve wood?'

*By* is an interesting word because of certain related forms. Normally it is a preposition or an adverb ('Stand by', 'near by'). Like *in*, it has a special form as a noun—*bye* in cricket, tennis and other games. In *by-* (or *bye-*) law there is a confusion of both spelling and meaning. The original word was *byr-law*, where *byr* was the possessive case of the Norse *by*, 'a dwelling', which we have as a suffix in the proper nouns *Whitby* and *Grimsby*. But as the word developed a secondary meaning, 'a subordinate or accessory law', the spelling became assimilated to the adverbial *by*, usually, though not always, with the variant spelling *bye*.

*To*, as a preposition, once had a variant of Norse origin, *til*. Shakespeare has 'fight till the last gasp'. The true prepositional use of *till* in Modern English is restricted to the sense of time. We have already noted (page 126) the modern artificial distinction of the preposition *to* and the adverb *too*, with its particularised meanings. In the phrase 'to and fro', *to* is adverbial and *fro* is from the Norse *fra*, corresponding with the Anglo-Saxon *from*. The Scottish *frae* is of the same origin.

*With* has led, and still leads, a double life. Its original meaning (Anglo-Saxon *wip*) is 'against', 'in opposition to', 'from', which survives in such compounds as *withstand*, *withdraw*, *withhold*, and in such idioms as 'fight with', 'battle with'. But in the curious ways of language it acquired also the opposite sense of accompaniment or association, with various shades of meaning that fill over a column of small print in *S.O.E.D.* It is significant that the formula *with* + noun is the English equivalent or 'translation' of the Latin ablative, a word which means literally 'carried away from'. The adverbial form *withal* has, unfortunately, become archaic. Lady Macbeth, speaking of the murdered Duncan's blood, says, 'I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal', where Modern English would end feebly with the pronoun 'with it'. *Withal* was sometimes used as an emphatic form of *also*, the equivalent of our 'into the bargain'.

## CHAPTER VI

### PERSONS AND PLACES

Brutus and Cæsar: what should be in that 'Cæsar'?  
Why should that name be sounded more than yours?

#### I

MR. DOILEY (or Doyley), who set up shop in the Strand towards the end of the seventeenth century, sold a special material, 'at once cheap and genteel', which was used for summer wear and also for ornamental napkins at table. He has been richly rewarded for his pains by having his name immortalised in the language, and he is the representative of a number of pioneers in their own sphere of life who have achieved a similar immortality. Many of them were scientific inventors or discoverers who, making or finding some new thing, had the honour of bestowing their name upon it. Thus, to Professor Bunsen of Heidelberg we owe the word *bunsen* (burner), which came into English about 1880. The terms for the chief units of electrical energy, *watt*, *volt*, *ohm*, *ampère*, are derived from the names of four great eighteenth-century scientists—an Englishman, James Watt, better known for his work in connexion with the steam engine; an Italian, Alessandro Volta; a German, Georg Ohm; and a Frenchman, André Ampère. A similar, and very modern, addition to the language is *curie*, the word for the unit of radium activity, adopted in honour of Professor and Madame Curie, pioneers in radium research.

When we put on a *mackintosh* we are benefiting from the ingenuity of Charles Mackintosh, who in 1823 patented a cloth for keeping out the rain. The later *burberry* (1903) is also from the name of the original manufacturers (Burberrys Ltd.). James MacAdam, a Scottish engineer, won his reward

for inventing a new kind of material for paving roads. The word *macadam*, as the name for this material, came into English in 1824, and gave birth to a verb, *macadamise*, in 1825. A benefactor of the Merchant Navy, Samuel Plimsoll, has bequeathed us the phrase 'Plimsoll line'; and from his name we also get the colloquial *plimsoll* for a rubber shoe, probably by association with the rubber sheath of the Plimsoll line itself. To an eighteenth-century French politician, Etienne de Silhouette, we owe the word for a portrait in profile. Another Frenchman, Louis Daguerre, who invented (1838) the earliest process of photography, gave us *daguerrotype*, a word which has now become something of a museum piece, as has *marconigram*, from Marconi, the famous electrical inventor. A good example of a modern adaptation of an inventor's name is *bakelite* for a synthetic material invented by L. H. Baekeland. It has already found its way into one or two dictionaries, including the Supplement to *Chambers* (1943). Slightly older is the word *pelmanism* for a system of memory training invented by L. H. Pochlmann, of Munich, towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Many garden flowers and plants are named after the horticulturalist who first introduced or propagated them; but most of the resultant words, like the uneuphonious *clarkia*, are mere *ad hoc* formations which do not usually find a place in the dictionary. Two, however, are well established—*fuchsia*, from Leonhard Fuchs, a German botanist who flourished in the sixteenth century, and *dahlia*, from Dahl, an eighteenth-century Swede.

Another innovator has given us a word which scarcely does justice to his memory. This is Christopher Pinchbeck (1670–1732), the inventor of an alloy of zinc and copper which now bears his name. The word *pinchbeck*, as noun and adjective, developed its derogatory meaning, 'cheap' or 'sham', about 1850, well over a century after Pinchbeck's death. With *pinchbeck* may be compared the word *tawdry*, which has a curious history. It is a shortening (see page 93) of Saint Audrey, and was originally used as a noun, which was itself a

contraction of the phrase 'Saint Audrey's lace'. The *S.O.E.D.* gives a quotation from Dryden: 'Of which the Naiades . . . made them taudries for their necks'. Saint Audrey, who is associated with Ely, 'thought herself punished for wearing rich necklaces of jewels, and therefore after that wore necklaces of fine silk called taudrey laces' (Blount, quoted in *S.O.E.D.*). It was the cheap but showy quality of these laces that gave the adjective its modern meaning, which, however, dates back to the seventeenth century.

## II

It is natural that public men like monarchs, politicians and statesmen should sometimes hand down their names to posterity, not only in the record of the history book but also in the pages of the dictionary. We still call a policeman a *bobby* after Sir Robert Peel, who early in the nineteenth century established the Irish Constabulary on a pattern that was later copied in England; but the word *peeler*, formed from his surname, has now dropped out of use. The Duke of Wellington gave his name to a military top-boot, much used during the Peninsular War. Modern fashions in boots have kept the name alive, usually in the plural—*wellingtons*. From the name of Prince Albert we get the word *albert* for a watch chain, and W. E. Gladstone, the great Prime Minister, has given us an epithet for a certain type of bag. The word *sandwich* keeps alive the memory of a certain Earl of Sandwich who, in the wild days of the Regency, sat for twenty-four hours at a stretch at the gaming table fortified only by slices of meat clapped between pieces of bread.

Several of the horse-drawn vehicles of the nineteenth century were baptised with the names of famous men and women. Among them are *victoria*, after the Queen herself, and *brougham*, after Lord Brougham. A man in a humbler station of life, Joseph Hansom (1803-1882), registered in 1834 a 'patent safety cab' which has carried his name into the dictionary. There is, in fact, a strong tendency in the modern language to associate the names of original makers or inventors

with vehicles. The *victoria*, the brougham and the hansom belong now to history—and Victorian literature; they smack of Sherlock Holmes and the early *Strand Magazine*. Even more remote is *shillibeer*, which for a brief time commemorated George Shillibeer (1797–1866), the pioneer of omnibuses in London. Nowadays we speak of a Morris, an Austin, a Rolls Royce, a Ford, a Daimler, a de Haviland. In actual fact these names are still merely attributive adjectives to the nouns ‘motor-car’ or ‘aeroplane’; that is to say, they have not yet, like *hansom* and *brougham*, taken their place as independent words in the language. Whether they will ever become true common nouns, spelt with a small letter, only time will show.

Other personal names remain in the halfway house of attributive use, without attaining to a status of their own. Thus we have *Davy* lamp, after Sir Humphrey Davy (1778–1829), and *Maxim* gun, after Sir Hiram Maxim. It is interesting to note, however, that the originally attributive *Shrapnel* (shell) after its inventor, General Shrapnel, has achieved independence as a common noun *shrapnel*, with a slight difference of meaning. There are several examples in very modern times. We speak of an Eden hat, a Belisha beacon, a Churchill tank, a Morrison or an Anderson air-raid shelter, after Mr. Herbert Morrison and Sir John Anderson respectively. These last two *Punch* immortalised in the caption to a picture towards the end of the world war:

Mrs. Morrison is in the Anderson, and Mrs. Anderson is in the Morrison.

But if our recent famous English statesmen have achieved only a linguistic semi-immortality, at least one European politician has bequeathed a word, his own name, to the language. This is V. A. L. Quisling, a Norwegian, who aided the Germans in the invasion of his own country (1940). Though it has not yet had time to gain a place in the standard dictionary, the word *quisling*, for ‘one who treacherously collaborates with the enemy’ is likely to establish itself, since it is simple and has an almost onomatopœic quality.

## III

In a similar way, several of our familiar words are derived from the names of places. The Crusaders (see page 20) brought back *damask*, from Damascus, a word which is now used as a noun for a certain fabric of delicate linen, but retains also one or two attributive uses, as in 'damask rose', 'damask steel'. Shakespeare (*Twelfth Night*) has 'fed on her damask cheek' where *damask* means 'of the colour of the damask rose'. The word *damson* is a corruption of the medieval *damascene*, for 'prunum damascenum', the plum of Damascus. Another word which we may owe to the Crusaders, though there is some doubt about its origin, is *hazard*. Hazard was, according to a mediaeval chronicler, a dicing game, so called from the castle of Asart in Palestine.

From the East comes also the word *currant*, for the grape of Corinth. *S.O.E.D.* gives a quotation: 'corinthes, or currans, as they are vulgarly called', from a seventeenth-century writer. *China* is a shortened form of *china-ware*, the name given to a commodity which was introduced into Europe from China. *Japan*, for a hard varnish or lacquer that originated in Japan, came into English as early as the sixteenth century. It is now more familiar to us in its derivative verbal form *japanned*. From the name of the Indian city Calicut we get *calico* (1540), and from Egypt the word *gypsy* (see also page 132). The French town *Bayonne* probably gave us *bayonet*, though there is an alternative derivation, from the Old French *bayon*, a shaft or cross-bow. Oporto, in Portugal, is immortalised in *port* (wine); from the name of a Norfolk village, *Worsted*, we get the word, spelt *worsted*, for a particular kind of cloth. This is at least as old as Chaucer:

Of worsted was his cope.

Artois in France gave us *artesian* (well), Lydd in Kent the name of the explosive *lyddite*, and Canterbury the verb or noun *canter*, originally for the trot of the pilgrims' horses. To the names of two of the Channel Islands we owe the words *jersey* and *guernsey*, originally for a fisherman's woollen

garment, but now extended to general use. With these we may compare the modern importation *fair-isle*, for an ornamental pullover, so called from its origin in the Fair Isle off the north of Scotland.

One typical American importation, *bunkum*, deserves a special note. It is, in its English form, a corruption of Buncombe, the name of a county in North Carolina, the member for which, having in actual fact nothing to say, insisted that he was 'bound to speak for Buncombe'. In earlier use the word kept something of its political significance, and generally occurred in a phrase modelled on or adapted from that quoted above; but in Modern English it has the sense of fatuous or tall talk.

Modern journalistic idiom will sometimes go a long way with proper names, especially by adapting them as verbs. One example will suffice. The German city of Hamburg was heavily attacked by British and American bombers in 1943, and much of it completely destroyed. Later, when Berlin was similarly attacked, one newspaper had the headline 'Berlin hamburged'. But this process is, after all, an old one. We have Shakespeare's 'out-herods Herod' (*Hamlet*, iii. 2), which has been a model for innumerable phrases of the same type. Two well-established examples of such verb formations are *shanghai*, 'to drug, or otherwise render insensible, and ship on board a vessel wanting hands' (*S.O.E.D.*), from the Chinese port Shanghai, and *boycott*, noun as well as verb, from Captain Boycott, the victim of a particular type of ostracism by the Irish Land League (1880).

All these words have achieved a real place in the dictionary as common nouns, adjectives or verbs; others, like some we have already noted in connexion with personal names, have as yet only an attributive use, and retain in writing the capital letter as a sign of their origin. *Banbury* (cake), from Banbury in Oxfordshire, has already attained to a certain independence; we may, and do, speak of a *banbury*, and write the word with a small *b*. But *Bath* in 'Bath bun', is still attributive and 'proper'; as, for example, are *Orpington*, *Rhode Island*, *Dorking*

and *Aylesbury* for the names of particular breeds of poultry, and *Brussels* and *Axminster* as epithets for 'carpet'.

## IV

We harvest a crop of words from the proper names, of both persons and places, in literature. The Bible gives us *babel* (Genesis, ix. 9), which the *S.O.E.D.* traces back to *Babylon*; *jeremiad* for a gloomy outburst of pessimism, from the prophet Jeremiah; *jezebel* for a wicked or painted woman, from the name of King Ahab's wife (i Kings, xvi); and the (now archaic) *lazar* for leper, from the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke, xvi). *Philistine*, for an uncultured person, was first used early in the nineteenth century, and was later popularised by Matthew Arnold. Other Biblical names are used in stereotyped phrases, with definite allusive reference to their original. Thus we speak of a traitor as a Judas, of 'a doubting Thomas' (John, xx), of 'a veritable Gallio' for 'one who cares for none, of these things' (Acts, xviii. 17), of a Solomon, and of a 'daughter of Eve'. From *Bethlehem* we get the corruption *bedlam*, the word used for an asylum, so called from St. Mary of Bethlehem, a London priory once used as a madhouse. Some, like *Eden* and *Jerusalem*, are used in symbolical language. In one of his most famous passages Shakespeare refers to England as 'this other eden', and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch reminds us<sup>1</sup> how the very word *Jerusalem* means to many a man 'the city familiar in spirit to his parents when they knelt, and to their fathers before them; not only the city which was his nursery and yet lay just beyond the landscape seen from his window; its connotation includes not only what the word "Rome" has meant and ever must mean to thousands on thousands setting eyes for the first time on the City; but it holds, too, some hint of the New Jerusalem, the city of twelve gates before the vision of which St. John fell prone'. That is a significant passage, since it expresses the sense of association which, for different men in different ways, may belong not only to the word *Jerusalem* but also to many another word.

<sup>1</sup> In *The Art of Reading*.



Mythology has also given us its quota. From Norse legend we get the names of some of the days of the week. *Tuesday* is from 'Tiwes dāy', Tiw being the name of a Teutonic god, cognate with the Latin *deus*; *Wednesday* (A.-S. *Wodnesdæg*) is the day of Woden; *Thursday* of Thor, and *Friday* of the goddess Frig, the wife of Odin, whose name is of the same root as the word *free*. *Saturday*, the day of Saturn, and the names of some of the months are the legacy of classical myth and history. *January* is the month of Janus, the two-faced god who presided over doors and entrances, and therefore was appropriate to the 'entrance' or beginning of the year. *March* derives from Mars, the god of war, from whose name we get also the adjective *martial*, *May* from the goddess Maia, and *June* from Juno. *July* is named in honour of Julius Caesar, the reformer of the calendar, and *August* from the Emperor Augustus.

It is not surprising that we owe more words to classical than to Norse mythology. From the name of a winding river in Phrygia (Greek *Maiandros*, Latin *Mæander*) we get the word *meander*. Shakespeare has it as a noun—'through forthrights and meanders'—but in Modern English the verbal use is more common, in metaphorical as well as literal senses: we speak of 'a meandering stream' and also of a 'meandering speech'. Tantalus, who gave away the secrets of the gods and was condemned to perpetual hunger and thirst amidst food and drink that always receded from him, has bestowed his name upon a decanter stand, and, more important, has given us the verb *tantalise*. *Volcano* comes to us, through the Italian, from Vulcan, the blacksmith of the gods, whose forge was supposed to be below Mount Etna. A later derivative (1836) from the same source is *vulcanite*, with its verb *vulcanise*, for a scientific preparation of rubber and sulphur. Through Italian also we get *cicerone*, from the name of the great Roman orator, though the origin of its English meaning, 'a guide', is uncertain. Greek literature has given us the word *odyssey*,

'a long and arduous journey', from Odysseus, the hero of Homer's epic; the word is dated 1889 in the *S.O.E.D.* And from Latin literature comes the adjective *thrasonical*, 'boastful', formed from Thraso, the name of a braggart in one of Terence's comedies. Shakespeare uses it (*As You Like It*, v. 2. 35):

Caesar's thrasonical brag of 'I came, I saw, and I overcame'.

## VI

A little group of words have their origin in classical place-names. Atticus, the Greek province in which Athens stood, has given us *attic*, originally a technical term in architecture ('a small column and entablature placed above another order of much greater height constituting the main façade'—*S.O.E.D.*). From that the progression to the modern meaning is obvious. *Attic*, too, is in quite common literary use as a general synonym for 'Greek'; we have it in the stereotyped phrase 'Attic salt or wit'. The old enemy of Athens, Sparta, has given us the adjective *spartan*, and its province, Laconia, noted for men of terse and unemotional speech, the adjective *laconic*. The warriors of Parthia, who in simulating flight shot their arrows backwards, have left their mark upon the language in the phrase 'a Parthian shot'. From Rome itself come not only its 'proper' adjective *Roman* but also the words *romance* and *romantic*, both of which have, as Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith points out,<sup>1</sup> a long and interesting history in the literary language.

## VII

Similarly, we derive several words from Greek philosophy and philosophers. *Academy* is an anglicisation, through French, of *Academe*, the name of the garden in Athens where Plato taught. Its general use for 'school' has now died out, though we have a survival of it in the title 'Royal Military

<sup>1</sup> *Words and Idioms*.

Academy'. In the modern language the word is reserved for literary or scientific institutions—the Royal, the British Academy, Academy of the Fine Arts. The adjective *académic*, however, retains the older and more general sense. *Stoic* and the adjective *stōical* derive from the Stoics, who took their name from *Stoa*, the porch or hall in which the philosopher Zeno lectured. From Epicurus, the Athenian philosopher (300 B.C.) we get *epicure* and *epicurean*. The philosophy of Epicurus exalted the pleasures of life. In Modern English the noun *epicure* for 'one who cultivates a refined taste for the pleasures of the table' (*S.O.E.D.*) has had a slight narrowing or twist of meaning. But this sense is at least as old as Chaucer; his franklin, in whose house it 'snewed of mete and drinke' was 'Epicurus owen sone.' The word *cynic* is not in quite the same category, but it is convenient to include it here. It is from the Greek *kunos*, 'dog', a nickname given to certain philosophers, the chief of whom was Diogenes, who despised worldly pleasure and comfort. Again there has been a twist of meaning. Though Diogenes expressed his contempt for the common amenities by living in a tub, he did not, like the modern cynic, cultivate a general disbelief in human goodness. To the names of other philosophers we owe certain adjectives which have definite connotations in the language of to-day. Examples are '*platonic* love', '*Platonic* system' (in astronomy), from Plato; '*socratic* method' (of argument), from Socrates; and '*Aristotelian* principles', from Aristotle.

## VIII

Adjectives have been, or may be, fashioned from the names of most of the classical gods, heroes and places. Some of these like *venereal* (from Venus), *aeolian*, *orphean* (from Orpheus), *olympic*, and *bacchanalian* (from Bacchus), have become part and parcel of the language. A few come from the vocabulary of astrology (see page 71), as, for example, *jovial*, *saturnine* and *mercurial*, which originally described men's dispositions or temperaments according to their 'stars'. But besides these

we have in literature a host of allusive adjectives formed from classical names. Thus when Shakespeare writes:

but once put out thy light,  
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,  
I know not where is that Promethean heat  
That can thy light relume;

the adjective *Promethean* at once suggests, or ought to suggest, the Greek legend of Prometheus, who stole fire from Olympus, and taught men the use of it. We are reminded, indeed, how thoroughly our literature, at least up to the end of the eighteenth century, is steeped in classical lore. In a recent lecture,<sup>1</sup> Professor Sutherland has commented on this fact, observing that with the decay of classical education our understanding of the literature of the past is rendered far more difficult and uncertain. 'This', he says, 'was the sort of knowledge an eighteenth-century poet or prose writer counted upon your having, and owing to the strong classical bias of the eighteenth-century school curriculum he did not count upon it in vain. To-day the response is far less certain. A shift in the emphasis of education has left the twentieth-century reader less well-equipped to respond to those literary associations, on which our poets and prose writers were accustomed to play'. Professor Sutherland's comment has, of course, a wide and general application; but it may well apply in particular to such adjective formations, common in our poetry and prose, as have been mentioned in this paragraph.

## IX

Several interesting words have their origin in modern literature. Gargantua, the giant in the novel of Rabelais, has given us the adjective *gargantuan*; and from the famous romance of the Spaniard Cervantes we get *quixotic*. *Euphuism*, for affected or high-flown language, is derived from Euphues, the hero of various romantic tales by the sixteenth-century writer John Lyly, whose style Shakespeare imitated in *i Henry IV*.

<sup>1</sup> 'English in the Universities' (Cambridge).

Curiously, Shakespeare himself has bequeathed us very few 'name-words', no doubt because most of his characters have the conventional Italianised names common in the Elizabethan drama. But *falstaffian* has gained a limited currency; and we speak allusively of 'a veritable Shylock', or of 'a modern Portia'. *Utopia* (Greek *ou*, 'not' and *topos*, 'place') was a coinage of Sir Thomas More for his description of the ideal state (1516). With its adjective *utopian* it has passed into the common language, and is, indeed, a much overworked word to-day.

From Swift we get *lilliputian* and *yahoo*. *Lilliputian* was used very early after the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* in the general sense 'little', 'diminutive.' Gray, for example, uses the phrase 'lilliputian travels' in one of his letters. Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop (in *The Rivals*) is the mother of all malapropisms; her own name was, of course, adapted from the French phrase *mal à propos*, but *malapropism* in its present sense, 'a nice derangement of epitaphs' (to quote the old lady herself) did not establish itself in the language till the middle of the nineteenth century.

We owe to Dickens the words *gamp*, *pickwickian* ('in a pickwickian sense'), *wellerism* and *bumbledom*. These words gradually gained currency after the appearance of the novels which contained the original characters. Thus *bumbledom*, from Mr. Bumble the beadle in *Oliver Twist* (1837) is dated 1856 in the *S.O.E.D.*, and *gamp* is dated 1864, twenty years after the appearance of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which we meet Sarah Gamp and her umbrella. Other Dickens names, like Micawber, Pecksniff, Bill Sikes and Jingle, belong to our regular store of allusive language. From a late nineteenth-century novel, George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1893) we have the word *trilby*, 'applied to various articles resembling those used or worn in the dramatised version of the novel; especially a kind of soft felt hat worn by men' (*S.O.E.D.*). About the same period Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes and Watson, which have now become generic names for a detective and his 'stooge'.

A more modern example of a literary name adopted into the ordinary language is *robot*, from the Czech word *robota*, 'a statute labourer', used by Karel Capek as the name of a character in his play *R.U.R.* (1920). *Robot* gained general currency with very little delay; it is dated 192½ in the *S.O.E.D.* which gives an illustrative quotation from Mr. Bernard Shaw. In very modern times it has been used of mechanical devices like traffic signals on the road (*robot* lights), and in 1944 was applied to the flying bomb (*robot* plane). All such words are, in effect, nicknames, which so took the popular fancy that after a time they passed into colloquial use, and eventually won a place in the dictionary.

## X

We have a few adaptations of the names of literary or other personalities. To the technical vocabulary of verse belong *alcaics*, from *Alcaeus*, a Greek lyric poet of about 600 B.C., *sapphics* from Sappho the poetess of about the same period, and *alexandrine*, which is derived either from the name *Alexandre* Paris, a French poet, or from *Alexander* (the Great), on whom many poems in this measure—in English, the twelve-syllabled line—were written. *Dunce* is of particular interest. It enshrines the name of a fourteenth-century theologian, John Duns Scotus, from whom sprang the sect of the Dunses. At first the word had the general meaning of 'pedant', but its modern meaning developed as early as the late sixteenth century. In *namby-pamby* we have a facetious formation from the name of Ambrose Philips (1675–1749), who was noted for his sentimental pastoral verse. Pope ridiculed him in the *Dunciad*—a title which, by the way, preserves something of the older meaning of *dunce*. The word *namby-pamby* itself was coined by another eighteenth-century critic, Carey. From the name of Doctor Johnson comes the literary term *Johnsonese* (still usually spelt with a capital letter) for any style of writing which imitates the alleged pompous Latinism of Johnson's own. Johnson suggests Boswell; and from Boswell we get *Boswellise*, 'to write or treat with adulation', in the

manner of Boswell as a biographer. Even its negative, *debossellise*, gained a certain currency, but it has been ousted in recent years by the expressive Americanism *debunk*. More modern examples in this category are the invention *janeite*, for an idolater of Jane Austen, which is fairly common in the peculiar journalese of the sixpenny reviews, but has not yet been exalted to dictionary rank; *birrellism* for literary gossip in the style of Augustine Birrell (died 1933), and *spoonerism* for the accidental confusion of consonants in speech said to be characteristic of the Oxford don Rev. W. A. Spooner (1844–1930), who—to quote one example—once read the line of the hymn ‘Conquering kings their titles take’ as ‘Kinkering kongs their titles take.’

## XI

A few Christian names have given us common nouns, or nouns with attributive use, often in hyphenated or real compounds. The chief of these is *Jack*, which appears in many such words or formations. Typical examples are *cheap-jack*, *steeple-jack*, *jack-of-all-trades*, *jack-tar*, *boot-jack*, *jack-rabbit*, *jackdaw*, and *jack* meaning variously a roasting spit, a contrivance used in lifting heavy weights, the small white ball in the game of bowls, and the knave in cards. Shakespeare uses the word for the keys of a virginal:

How oft, when thou, my music, music play'st . . .  
Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap  
To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,  
Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,  
At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand!

*Tom* appears in *tom-cat*, in the affectionate term *tommy* for a British soldier, and in such compounds as *tommy-gun*, and *tommy-bar*. A somewhat disguised word of this type is *dandy*, for a fop, which is derived from a Scottish diminutive form of *Andrew*.

## XII

As we have already seen in connexion with classical adaptations, adjectives can be made almost at will from proper names, whether of persons or of places. Most of them remain 'proper', that is to say, they are spelt with a capital letter, not having entered what may be called the common stock of the language. Examples are: *Spenserian*, *Petrarchan* (Milton called the sonnet the 'Petrarchan stanza', from Petrarch, the Italian poet, its inventor), *Shakespearian*, *Miltonic*, *Napoleonic*, *Dickensian*. In a similar fashion we get abstract nouns in *-ism* from personal names, like *Darwinism*, *Mendelism* and the modern *Hitlerism*. Some adjectives are formations from the Latinised version of English names; thus *Cantabrigian*, *Oxonian*, *Salopian* mean 'of Cambridge', 'of Oxford', and 'of Shropshire' respectively. In this connexion we may note one adjective derived from a Latinised personal name which has, in modern times, become a naturalised word in the language. This is *shawian*, from George Bernard Shaw (1856—). The *S.O.E.D.* dates it 1920, but does not include a similar, though not Latinised, adjective from the name of H. G. Wells, Shaw's great contemporary, though already, in such phrases as 'a *wellsian* fantasy', the word has achieved the dignity of a small initial letter.

The spirit of language, like the wind, bloweth where it listeth. Just over a hundred years ago, a notorious murderer, William Burke, went to the gallows; but his name lives on in the verb *to burke*. Knavery and eccentricity, as well as genius, become immortal in the dictionary; and a little forgotten place may have a name remembered in the common speech of men.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Weekley, in his *Something About Words* (p. 105 ff.), records some very interesting examples of 'name' words which have now, for the most part, dropped out of common use, though they may survive in local speech.



## HALF AN HOUR WITH THE DICTIONARY

As a kind of appendix to the comments and examples given in the previous chapters, let us take, almost at random, a characteristic passage of English prose and, choosing a number of words, phrases or expressions, follow where they lead us in the pages of a good dictionary. In this way we shall discover the family relationship of words, their shades of meaning, their synonyms and antonyms, their idiomatic and figurative significance; that is to say, we shall be putting into practice the principles already outlined in this book. The advantage of taking a passage in this way is that the experiment can be repeated. Other pieces, whether of verse or of prose, will open up new adventures in words. We shall learn to realise the vast wealth of vocabulary which we have at our command when we speak or write, and to realise also the importance of using the right word in the right place. All kinds of questions will arise which a good dictionary will answer; and in finding the answer we shall also find that a dictionary can be one of the most fascinating books in the world.

Here, then, is our passage—part of a famous essay by William Hazlitt, written, in his own clear but robust style, at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone.

The fields his study, nature was his book.

I cannot see the wit of walking and talking at the same time. When I am in the country, I wish to vegetate like the country. I am not for criticising hedgerows and black cattle.

I go out of town in order to forget the town and all that is in it; there are those who for this purpose go to watering-places and carry the metropolis with them. I like more elbow-room and fewer encumbrances. I like solitude, when I give myself up to it, for the sake of solitude; nor do I ask for

a friend in my retreat,  
Whom I may whisper solitude is sweet.

The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do just as one pleases. We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. It is because I want a little breathing-space to muse on indifferent matters, where Contemplation

May plume her feathers and let grow her wings,  
That in the various bustle of resort  
Were all too ruffled, and sometimes impair'd

that I absent myself from the town for a while, without feeling at a loss the moment I am left by myself. Instead of a friend in a post-chaise or in a Tilbury, to exchange good things with, and vary the same stale topics over again, for once let me have a truce with impertinence.

*going a journey:* The interesting word *journey* is dealt with on page 66. But what of the idiom? This phrase would almost certainly suggest to us to-day a going from place to place in a vehicle, say a train or a motor-car. Actually, Hazlitt is talking about what we should call a walk, or in a more familiar modern colloquialism, a 'hike', a word which is said to have been used by no less a person than John Wesley, though *S.O.E.D.* dates it 1809. Hazlitt himself later on uses the phrase 'a three hours' march to dinner'; we should probably prefer, in this context, *tramp*, since *march* has a military suggestion. Hence we have as 'synonyms' for *journey*—*walk*, *hike*, *march*, *tramp*, and if we extended our thought to the sea and air, we could add *voyage* and *flight*. *Walk* suggests its French synonym *promenade*, which has a restricted formal significance

in verbal use, and as a noun is associated with the 'walk' or 'front' at the sea-side, or the gallery of a concert-hall.

*like*: The dictionary reveals the surprising fact that *like*, both as adjective and verb, is of the same origin as the word *lich* or *lych*, meaning a 'body', which survives in our compound *lych-gate*—the gate to the churchyard, where the body (that is, the corpse of a dead person) was set down before burial. The root meaning of *like* is, therefore, *conform* (form = 'body').

*by myself*: Why *by*? The idiom probably arises from an abbreviation of some such phrase as '(accompanied) by myself'.

*enjoy*: The root word is *joy*. We derive from it the adjectives *joyful* and *joyous*, between which there is a fine distinction; *joyous* is now mainly poetical. Another derivative is the verb *rejoice*.

*society*: The root is the Latin word *socius*, 'a companion'. Other derivatives are *associate* and *association* (with their negatives *dissociate* and *dissociation*), and *sociable*. *Society* has a number of distinctive meanings—general, as in this passage, formal, as in 'the Scientific Society', and particular, in the sense 'the aristocracy' or 'the upper classes'. Milton uses the word (*Lycidas*) in the sense of companies:

There entertain him all the saints above  
In solemn troops and sweet societies.

*nature*: The root is the Latin *natus* (from *nasco*, 'be born'), from which we also get *natural*, *native*, *natal*. We may compare the Saxon word *kind* (Shakespeare uses the two words together, almost as synonyms—'Were all thy children kind and natural'), and the adjective *general* from the Latin root *genus*, 'class', 'race'. See page 61.

*company*: The Latin *cum* ('with') and *panis* ('bread'); so *companion* means 'one who eats bread with another'.

English is rich in synonyms, with their various shades of meaning: *acquaintance*, *associate*, *friend*, *comrade*, which comes to us, through the French *camerade*, from the Spanish *camarada*, a word cognate with the Latin *camera* ('room'). *Comrade*, therefore, means 'one who shares a tent or a room with another'.

*alone*: A disguised compound—'all one'—like the word *atone* (page 59).

*wit*: This is an interesting word, of the same root as *wise* (see page 34). The idiom Hazlitt uses is now archaic: we should say 'I cannot see the sense'; and here we have a reminder that *wit* was at one time synonymous with *sense*, in such a phrase as 'my five wits'. In modern usage *wit* is often associated, though it is by no means synonymous, with *humour* (see page 71). Fowler makes this interesting tabular classification to mark the difference:

	Motive or Aim	Province	Method or Means	Audience
Humour.	Discovery.	Human Nature.	Observation.	The Sympathetic.
Wit.	Throwing light.	Words and Ideas.	Surprise.	The Intelligent.

*country*: This word leads us into all kinds of bypaths. First, it is the word for a political unit, synonymous with *nation*; then it means the open spaces, the fields and woods, as distinct from the town or city. As an adjective it has a Latin synonym *rural* (Latin *rus*, *ruris*), and the difference between *country* (adjective) and *rural* is, of course, a question of context; but the distinction is not always easy. It is to be noted that Cobbett, a forthright user of English, calls his journeys up and down England 'rural rides'; but we usually speak of a country walk. The Latin *rus* gives us also the adjective *rustic*, which has a

restricted meaning in Modern English ('a rustic seat'). As a noun it has a slightly derogatory air: *rustic* has somewhat the same meaning as the Saxon *churl* had up to Shakespeare's time. *Countryman* (usually compounded) has two meanings corresponding with the two meanings of *country* itself. In the sentence: 'We are Shakespeare's countrymen' the word *countrymen* implies that we belong to the same nation as Shakespeare; but when we say 'Thomas Hardy was a countryman', we mean that he lived (for the most part) in the country as opposed to the town.

*criticising*: The root is the Greek *crisis*, which derives from the Greek word meaning 'to separate'. Hence the meaning 'discriminate' or 'judge'. The cognate nouns are *critic* and *criticism*; the adjective is *critical*. But *crisis* itself has the extended meaning of 'decisive separation'; hence, by implication, a 'turning-point'. The adjective is *critical*, which has, therefore, apparently two distinct meanings: 'a *critical* appreciation of poetry'; 'a patient in a *critical* condition'.

*hedge-rows*: A typical English compound, now commoner in literary writing and poetry than in speech, where *hedges* is more usual. *Hedge* and *edge* are both Saxon words, but not from the same root.

*black*: Note how certain synonyms have arisen from natural phrase comparisons: *jet*, from 'black as jet', *inky* from 'black as ink'. There are a few interesting compound words in which *black* is the first element. *Blacksmith* is originally a worker in iron as opposed to *whitesmith*, a worker in tin; *blackguard* derives from the 'guard' or cleaners of black pots and pans, the menials in a great house. For *blackmail* and *blackleg* see page 81.

*cattle*: See page 50.

*out of town*: The idiom is interesting, notably the omission of the article: parallel phrases are 'in town', 'to town',

and the colloquial 'down town'. We may notice also the railway usage, *up* trains (i.e. up to town) and *down* trains ('down from town').

*in order to forget*: The modern idiom with the infinitive replaces the older *for* + infinitive: 'What went ye out for to see?' We may compare the French *pour donner, faire*, etc.

*purpose*: There is no difference in pronunciation between the noun and the verb. *Purpose* (verb) is usually followed by the gerund 'I purpose going'. It has a slightly stronger meaning than *propose*.

*watering-place*: This word originally applied to places where medicinal waters were taken, and was later applied to seaside towns. *Spa*, the name given to inland watering-places (Bath, Cheltenham, etc.) is the Belgian place-name.

*carry*: The word is cognate with the word *car* (see page 18). Its Saxon synonym, *bear*, is less common in modern usage than *carry*; but it has certain restricted meanings, e.g. 'to bear (rather than *carry*) a burden', and in special senses 'to bear pain, sorrow'. In the sense 'to *bear* children' the verb has a special past participle *born*.

*metropolis*: From two Greek words, *meter*, 'mother' and *polis*, 'city'. *Polis* gives us *policy*, *political*, *police*. In modern English the word usually means the capital city of the country (London); but it has also an ecclesiastical use for the capital city of a see (Canterbury, York); hence the noun *metropolitan*, which is synonymous with archbishop. The adjective *metropolitan* is usually associated with London: 'metropolitan police', 'metropolitan stage carriage'.

*elbow-room*: A compound that is generally used, as here, metaphorically.

*fewer*: In Modern English *few* is a numerical adjective qualifying a plural noun; *less* an adjective of size or quantity, without definite numerical sense.

*encumbrances*: The root is the Old French *encombrer*, a derivative from a Late Latin word (*in*)*combrare*, a corruption of *cumulus*, a heap.

*solitude*: The Saxon word is *loneliness*, but there is a subtle distinction of meaning, as also with the adjectives *solitary* and *lonely*. The Latin derivative *sole* is now used formally in the sense of *only* (adjective): 'the *sole* survivor'. *Lone* (adjective) is almost confined to poetic usage; *alone* may be an adjective in the predicate, but not as an epithet.

*give myself up*: An interesting example of (i) a 'reflexive' verb, that is a verb whose object (*myself*) is identical with the subject; (ii) a phrasal verb (*give up*) in which the object stands between the verb and the adverb particle (see page 104).

*sake*: A mysterious word. It has its origin in the Saxon *sacu*, which derives from a primitive root meaning 'quarrel', 'abuse'. Spenser first used the word in the sense of 'regard or consideration for some one' (*S.O.E.D.*); hence the idiom 'for the sake of'. From the parallel idiom 'for his name's sake' we get (probably) the noun *namesake*, which has, however, a separate and different meaning.

*retreat*: A doublet (see page 48) of *retract*, from the Latin *re-trahere*, 'draw back'. In Modern English *retract* (verb) is usually transitive, with an abstract object ('retract an opinion'); *retreat* is intransitive, with the physical sense of drawing back—usually in military language. The noun *retreat* is also part of the military vocabulary ('sound the retreat'); and is also used of a place to which a person withdraws for rest or refreshment. With this use we may compare that of the word *resort* for a holiday town ('seaside resort').

*whom*: Here the relative pronoun is indirect object after *whisper*: but the usage is archaic and poetical.

*whisper*: An interesting example of an onomatopœic word, that is, a word whose sound suggests its sense. Such

words arise naturally in the spoken language, and many of them have no derivative roots in other languages.

*sweet*: This word is representative of many adjectives which have first a 'concrete', and afterwards, by association (see page 73) an 'abstract' significance: 'Sugar is sweet'; 'Solitude is sweet'. *Sweet* had many uses in older English that have now been lost. The first line of Chaucer's *Prologue* has the phrase 'sweet showers'; one of George Herbert's lyrics begins 'Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright'; in Shakespeare the word is often used as a term of endearment or colloquial address: 'Sweet Sir Toby'. The Latin equivalent *dulcet* has a very limited use in Modern English, usually as an epithet to nouns like *music* or *harmony*. It is interesting to trace the differentiated meanings of other similar adjectives, e.g. *soft*, *hard*, *long*, *flat*, *round*. (See, in general, Chapter II.)

*soul of a journey*: The words *soul* and *spirit* are often used thus metaphorically. We may compare *genius* (page 154).

*liberty*: The Latin synonym of the Saxon *freedom*. Why have both words remained? What is the difference between them? Certain idioms like 'take the liberty', 'set at liberty', 'at liberty (to do)' provide a clue to the differentiation. Generally, we may say *liberty* has a stronger, and sometimes a slightly derogatory sense. The next step downwards is *licence*, which has given birth to the adjective of evil connotation, *licentious*. Similarly, however, *liberty* itself gives us the noun *libertine*.

*perfect*: See page 120 and, for pronunciation, page 146.

*think*: The archaic form *methinks*, which is an impersonal verb (= [it] seems to me), derives from the Saxon form *þyncan*, whose forms later became coincident with those of the Saxon word *þencan*, 'to think'. The impersonal verb is common in Chaucer:

Me thinketh it accordaunt to resoun.



*feel*: The following phrases illustrate a few of the varied uses of this verb:

'to feel cold'; 'feel the cold'; 'to feel a blow' (literal and metaphorical); 'to feel sympathy with'; 'to feel my hands'; 'to feel' (intransitive); 'to feel up to' (colloquial). *Feel* has first a physical and then a moral or spiritual significance.

*do*: Here a principal verb, or verb of full meaning; but also in Modern English a common auxiliary verb (see page 173).

*just*: In this idiom ('just as . . .') *just* is an adverb. Its near synonym is *exactly*. In Modern English *just* (adjective) has a restricted meaning, 'impartial', 'upright'. Shakespeare has an older sense, 'exact':

If thou takest less  
Or more than a just pound.

Later in the same play (*The Merchant of Venice*) he uses the idiom with the adverb:

• Nor cut thou less nor more  
Than just a pound.

'Just a . . .' is a common Modern English idiom. We also have the adverb in expressions like 'I could just see'.

*please*: The three main meanings of *please* are: (i) *desire*—as here, where the personal represents an older impersonal construction 'it pleases (= is agreeable to) one'; (ii) 'have pleasure (in)'—The construction is passive (I am pleased (to do)); (iii) 'Give pleasure to': He set out to please his audience. The ordinary noun is *pleasure*; the other noun derivative *pleasantry* has the special sense of 'joke' or 'jest'.

*chiefly*: The adjective (chief) is derived from the French *chef* from the Latin *caput*, which gives us, by direct derivation, *capital*.

*impediments*: *Impedimenta* was the technical Latin word for the baggage of an army, from the prefix *im-* and *pes, pedis*, 'foot': 'a hindrance to the feet', that is, to the progress of an army. In Modern English the word is used in a metaphorical sense (see page 55).

*inconveniences*: The root is the Latin *convenio*, 'come together', with the negative prefix *in-*.

*leave ourselves behind*: Another phrasal reflexive verb like 'give myself up' above.

*much more*: An idiom that defies grammatical analysis, like the parallel 'the more the merrier'. *Much* was originally an adjective, and is so used in older English. The Bible has 'much cattle', 'Much learning hath made thee mad'. Modern English retains the adjectival use in expressions like 'He hasn't much money' and colloquialisms of the type 'I haven't much use (or room) for —'. More usually *much* is an adverb modifying a comparative, as here. The noun (*muchness*) survives only in the phrase 'Much of a muchness'.

*get rid of*: A phrasal verb equivalent to the reflexive 'rid oneself of'. *Rid* is of Scandinavian origin, meaning originally 'to clear', 'to sweep away'. Swift (quoted in *S.O.E.D.*) uses it in this literal sense: 'When you rid up the parlour hearth in a morning'.

*it*: The anticipatory *it*, common in English syntax. We see it simply in such a sentence as 'It is true that we are in great danger', where *it*, standing before the verb, anticipates the real subject ('that we are in great danger') which is placed after the verb.

*because*: Originally two words, in the construction 'by cause that'. *Cause* is the Latin *causa*; so *because* is an interesting hybrid. When *because* became a real compound it took on conjunctive force, and the following conjunction *that* was eliminated.

*want*: The root meaning of the word is *lack*: 'The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want'; 'waste not, want not'. This sense is now most apparent in the noun (*want*). But, by association, the word came to mean 'desire', 'long' (for something which is lacking).

*a little*: The distinction between 'a little' and 'little' (without the indefinite article) is worth noting: 'a little', like 'a few', is positive—it really means 'quite a lot of'; 'little' is negative—it means 'almost none at all'.

*breathing-space*: A compound parallel with *elbow-room* (above). For a note on metaphorical expressions based on the parts and functions of the body see page 73.

*muse*: An interesting word. It is said to be derived from the Old French *muse*, which is of the same root as *muzzle*, and meant originally 'sniff the air when in doubt about scent' (*S.O.E.D.*). *Amuse* is a causal formation, 'to cause to muse', which has a restricted sense in Modern English. Eighteenth-century writers use an adjective *amusive*, which has now become archaic. Thomson (*Seasons*) has 'amusive drops' (of rain).

*indifferent*: The word has two uses: (i) qualifying personal nouns, and meaning 'impartial' or 'uninterested'—that is, 'not marking or stressing the difference'. Compare the Prayer Book phrase 'that they may truly and indifferently minister justice'; (ii) qualifying nouns denoting inanimate things or personal agent nouns, and meaning 'mediocre', 'undistinguished', 'undefined', or often in Modern English 'feeble' or 'bad'. In this context it means 'undefined', 'not specified'. The general tendency of the meaning in Modern English is a downwards one. By implication, an indifferent speech/speaker is a bad one; and even in the Prayer Book phrase quoted above the modern interpretation would be 'truly and badly minister justice'.

*matters*: From the Latin *materia*, meaning 'timber' or 'stuff',

It has a similar, though wider, sense in Modern English. But the word is also equivalent to the Latin *res*, any 'thing' (undefined), and has an associated verb ('it does not matter'). There are various idiomatic phrases—'What is the matter?', 'look into the matter', 'a matter of principle', 'no laughing matter', 'in the matter of' (translating the Latin *in re*).

*contemplation*: The root is the Latin *templum*, originally 'an open place for observation' (*S.O.E.D.*). The quality is here personified through the verse quotation that follows.

*plume*: An instance of the transference of the sense of a noun to a verb (see page 178). Here it means 'to trim or dress'. Metaphorically, we have it in the phrase 'plume (i.e. pride) oneself on'.

*wings*: One of our Scandinavian borrowings.

*various*: In Modern English *various* always qualifies a plural noun; with a singular noun (as here) we substitute the participle form *varied*.

*bustle*: The etymology of this word and of *ruffled* is unknown: both appear to be onomatopœic variants or corruptions of older Teutonic forms.

*resort*: The root is the French *sortir* 'to go out'. Here the word has the sense familiar in 'seaside resort'—i.e. a frequented place. Compare *retreat* (above).

*all*: The adverbial use of *all*, still quite common in Modern English, though *quite* has replaced it in some senses or contexts. *All right* is the most familiar example. Compounds with *all* are noted on page 100.

*too*: See page 126.

*sometimes*: One or two other compounds with *some* are interesting: *sometime* is restricted to such phrases as 'sometime mayor of', 'sometime lecturer in mathematics

at Oxford'; *somewhere* has established itself as a compound, but *somewhen*, though common in some parts of the country, is labelled by *S.O.E.D.* 'rare, affected'.

*impair'd*: The root is the Latin *pejor*, 'worse'.

*absent myself*: reflexive. The verb form is differentiated from the adjective by change of stress (*ábsent*, adjective; *absént*, verb—see page 141).

*while*: The Anglo-Saxon *hwil*, 'time', here used in its original sense. *Awhile* is a compound (adverb) formed from the indefinite article and the noun.

*moment*: The root is *move*. In the mechanical sense ('moment of a force') and the Latinised *momentum* this fundamental sense is preserved. The time sense ('a minute point of time'—hence *minute*) derived, somewhat remotely, from this. Probably the root idea is the quick movement of time:

The moving finger writes, and having writ  
Moves on.

*instead*: This compound preserves the Anglo-Saxon *stead*, 'place', which survives also in *homestead* and many place-names. The simple word remains in the archaism 'in his/her stead'.

*friend*: See page 167.

*post-chaise*: A period word (see page 76).

*Tilbury*: Another period word, originating from name of the original maker.

*exchange*: *Change* is the aphaeretic form (see page 91). In some senses it is synonymous with *exchange* ('change or exchange A for B'); but *change* has also an absolute sense: 'Times change', 'Everything changes'. The aphaeretic

'Change is often used for (Stock) Exchange, and in the phrase 'on change'. We have a peculiar use of the noun *change* for the money given back 'in exchange for a coin worth more than the purchase price of an article, etc.

*with*: Hazlitt, in common with all good English writers, defies the preposition-at-end bogey. Fowler has an interesting article on the subject.

*stale*: Here we have the word in its figurative use. The literal meaning is 'musty', 'not fresh'; we have it, in a slightly modified sense, in '*stale* bread'.

*topics*: Through the French *topique*, from Greek *topika*, the title of a treatise of Aristotle (Greek *topos*, 'place').

*over again*: A study of the various meanings and uses of the word *over* as set out in any good dictionary is well worth while. It is interesting to note that *over* is a comparative form of the root in the second syllable of *above*. For *again* see page 183.

*once*: See page 179.

*truce*: The root of this word, and of the noun *trust*, is *true*. *Tryst* has the same origin, but comes to us through a Scandinavian form.

*impertinence*: Literally 'that which does not belong': the word has undergone an interesting change of meaning (see page 69).

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